VANITY FAIR

JUNE 2024

THE TV ISSUE

FEATURING

DISNEY'S
SUCCESSION DRAMA

THE SILVER AGE OF
DAD TV

THE 50-YEAR QUEST TO MAKE
'100 YEARS OF SOLITUDE'

Plus

A Year in the Life of America's Top Hostage Negotiator

The Scary Skinny on Counterfeit Ozempic



Ayo Edebiri
WINS IT ALL

By LEAH FAYE COOPER

Photographs by RENELL MEDRANO




CHANEL
COLLECTION MÉTIERS D'ART 2023/24


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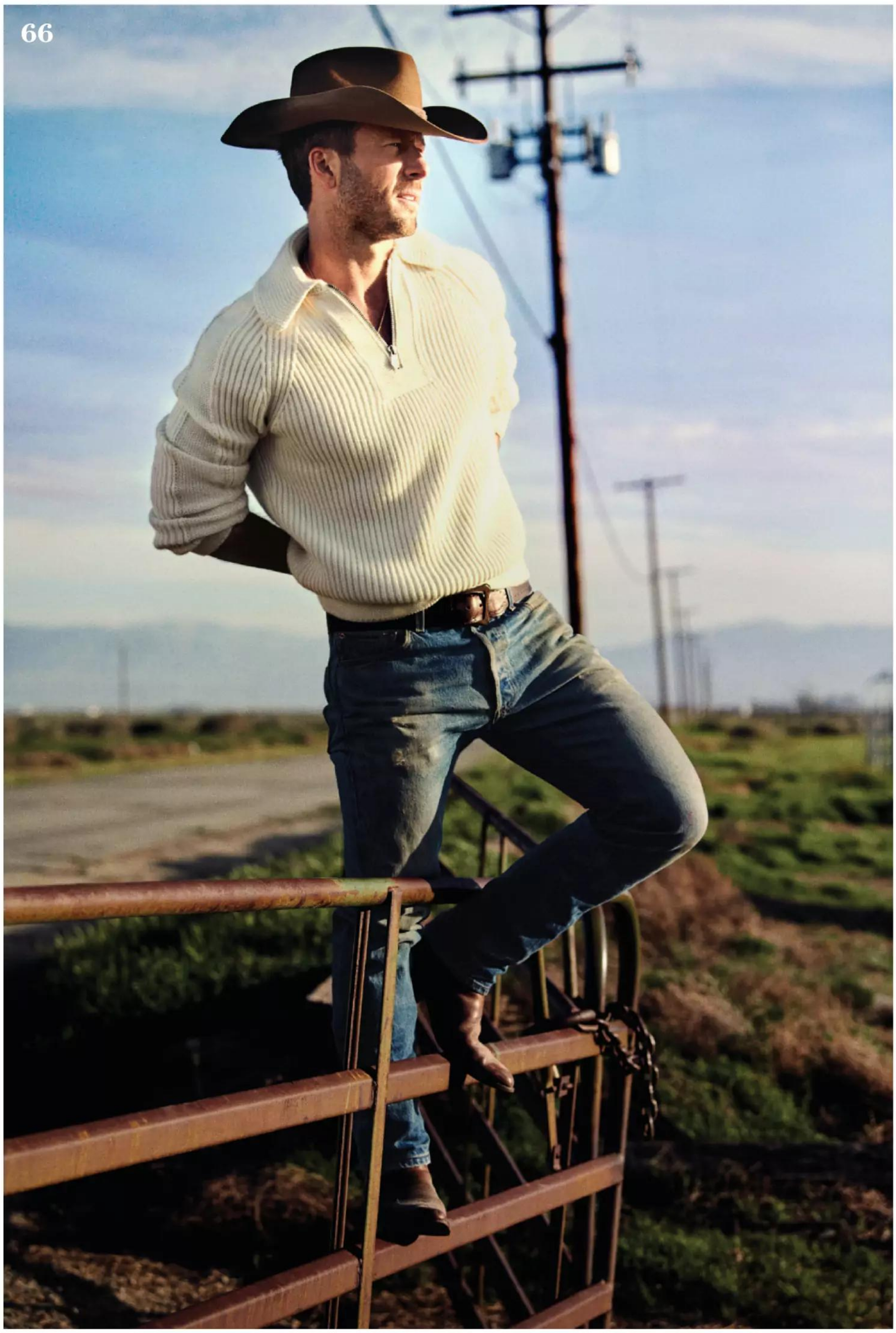
Alpine A110 R Turini: fuel economy and co_2 results for the Alpine A110 *R* Turini in mpg (l 100km) combined: 41.5 (6.8-6.9). co_2 emissions: 156 g/km wltp figures shown are for comparability purposes. actual real world driving results may vary depending on factors including

A110 R TURINI

weather conditions, driving styles, vehicle load or any accessories fitted after registration. for more information, please see **alpine-cars.co.uk**

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Ayo Edebiri's sweatshirt and shorts by **Marc Jacobs;** tank top by **Max Mara;** earrings by **Van Cleef & Arpels.** Hair products by **SheaMoisture.** Makeup products by **MAC.** Nail enamel by **Dior Vernis.** Hair by Lacy Redway. Makeup by Marcelo Gutierrez. Manicure by Maria Salandra. Tailor, Maria Del Greco. Set design by Julia Wagner. Produced on location by Ice Studios. Styled by Stella Greenspan. Photographed exclusively for *VF* by Renell Medrano in New Jersey. For details, go to VF.com/credits.

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MONTBLANC

100 Years of Meisterstück.
Written and directed by Wes Anderson.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY RENELL MEDRANO

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MARCO BAHLER

Mercury RISING

As summer finally makes an appearance, these are the hottest things to wear, see, sip and eat this month

■ ***Finer Things***

THINK PINK: This diamond and pink sapphire necklace and earrings set from David Morris (**2**) reflects the timelessness of Riviera glamour. *davidmorris.com*

OFF THE CUFF: Half watch, half work of art, this dazzling Piaget Creative Collection High Jewellery Watch (**10**) is a fitting tribute to 150 years of Piaget's craftsmanship. *piaget.com*

■ ***On Beauty***

OUT OF THIS WORLD: This new fragrance, Comète (**5**), is a fresh, powdery, delicate scent inspired by the celestial bodies so beloved by Gabrielle Chanel. *chanel.com*

CROWNING GLORY: Thick, glossy hair is everyone's dream—Hair Full Cycle's The Precise Serum (**9**) is proven to help. *hairfullcycle.com*

■ ***Style File***

IN THE SHADE: From the city to the coast, Gucci's Cat Eye Sunglasses (**1**) are a summer essential. *gucci.com*

HAMMER TIME: Based on a classic archival design, the Hammerschlag collection from Rimowa (**6**) is first class in every sense. *rimowa.com*

TAKE THE PLUNGE: Parisienne model and designer Ines de la Fressange lends her talents to Vilebrequin's latest range (**7**), with a distinctly French take on nautical chic. *vilebrequin.com*

■ ***For Pleasure***

AMONG THE STARS: Chef Yannick Alléno continues his winning streak at his debut UK restaurant, Pavyllon London at Four Seasons Hotel Park Lane (**3**), which gained a Michelin star just six months after opening. *pavyllonlondon.com*

MODEL BEHAVIOUR: Celebrating the fabulous career of one of the greatest supermodels, *Naomi In Fashion* opens on June 22 at the V&A (**4**). *vam.ac.uk*

RAISE A GLASS: Just in time for the season's finest events, the 2016 vintage of Gusbourne's exclusive Fifty One Degrees North sparkling wine (**8**) has launched. *gusbourne.com*



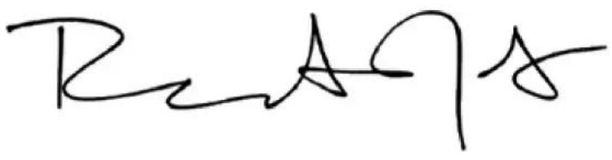
There was really only one choice for the cover star of our TV issue this year. Ayo Edebiri has been collecting awards and accolades for her performance in *The Bear*

throughout the show's first two seasons, and with the third dropping this summer, we couldn't wait to hear about everything she's doing in and out of the kitchen. Leah Faye Cooper headed to Chicago, where *The Bear* is shooting two consecutive seasons, to talk to Ayo about her upcoming projects, her adventures on the red carpet (where she's also on a winning streak), and—among other potent concerns—whether oat milk is really all it's cracked up to be. Ayo plays a chef on TV, but her professional experience in real life included an early stint behind a coffee counter. "I loved being a barista because I like order," she told Leah. "There's something kind of satisfying about getting it right." Her many satisfied fans would say she's done so.

At Disney, they're also thinking about getting it right—*it* in this case being the succession plan for when CEO Bob Iger vacates his chair at the end of 2026. As Natalie Jarvey and Joy Press report, four in-house executives are emerging as top contenders. The fate of what is fiscally a small nation—chief export: entertainment—hangs in the balance, as does Iger's legacy, which suffered some tarnishing when his previous pick for successor flamed out in under three years. Natalie and Joy dig into the contenders' backgrounds, bios, and odds, as well as the effect of this ongoing drama on the mood at the Magic Kingdom, where, as one insider puts it, "People don't know which horse to bet on. They're afraid to cross anybody."

Meanwhile, on location in Colombia, Silvana Paternostro reports on the much-anticipated upcoming Netflix production of *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* As she writes, Gabriel García Márquez held the rights to his classic novel close, and there's been no major screen adaptation on his terms—Spanish language, filmed in his home country—until now. Silvana, who has edited an oral history of Márquez, tells a rich tale about trying to do justice to a masterpiece: The streamer is planning a two-part 16-episode series, drawing from local actors for its cast and building the fictional town of Macondo from the ground up.

And in our already-existing city of dreams, a.k.a. Los Angeles, our West Coast editor Britt Hennemuth rides along with Glen Powell for a morning of flea market browsing and brunching, catching up with the *Anyone But You* star about his next movie, Richard Linklater's *Hit Man,* and how he's learned to take fame in stride.



RADHIKA JONES, *Editor in Chief*

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drinkaware.co.uk for the facts

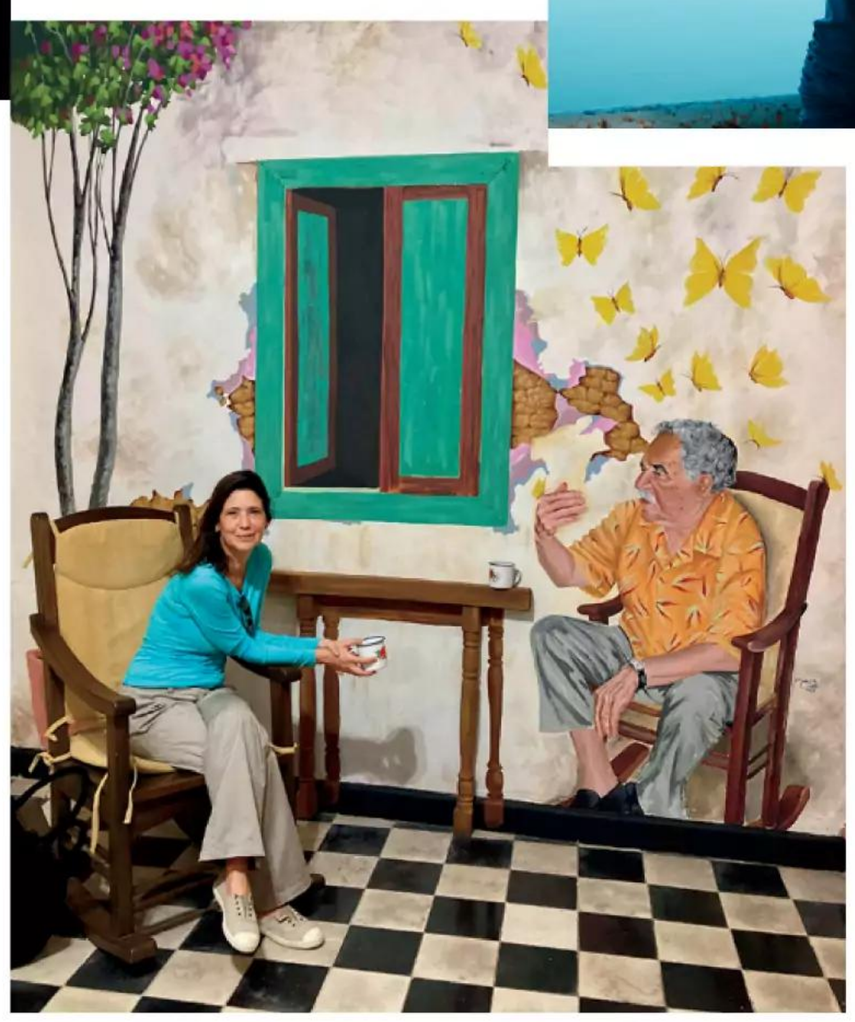
Contributors











Clockwise from top left: Matthew Brookes, Janine di Giovanni, Adam Ciralsky, Shawn Martinbrough, Silvana Paternostro, Stella Greenspan.



Matthew BROOKES

"THE HIT MAN," P. 66

Glen Powell was "full of positive energy with a mischievous personality and charm," says the England-born, South Africa–raised photographer, who is always keen to peel back the layers of his subjects. Brookes is set to release a new book, *Expression of Freedom* (Damiani), this fall.

Janine DI GIOVANNI

"JUSTICE WITHOUT BORDERS," P. 42

An award-winning war reporter for more than three decades, di Giovanni founded the Reckoning Project in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She is the author of eight books; the latest is *The Vanishing: Faith, Loss and the Twilight of Christianity in the Middle East* (Bloomsbury). She lives in Paris.

Adam CIRALSKY

"TAKE NO PRISONERS," P. 88

"I had no idea I would go to seven countries and spend over a year waiting for a denouement," says Ciralsky, an executive producer of and the inspiration for Netflix's *The Recruit,* of his piece detailing America's secretive and unorthodox efforts to free its citizens held abroad.

Stella GREENSPAN

"FUNNY GIRL," P. 44

The stylist and fashion director likes a sense of playfulness on set, which boded well for cover star Ayo Edebiri. The actor, Greenspan says, has "the best sense of humor and the most generous and beautiful spirit."

Silvana PATERNOSTRO

"MAGICAL THINKING," P. 74

"Gabo died 10 years ago, but he keeps showing up, full of surprises," says Paternostro of Gabriel García Márquez. She is currently working on a movie with director Peter Webber based on *Solitude & Company* (Seven Stories), her oral history of the Nobel laureate's life.

Shawn MARTINBROUGH

"SHOTS IN THE DARK," P. 58

Martinbrough was immediately inspired by the disturbing nature of Katherine Eban's story, which tracks a counterfeit version of Ozempic. An award-winning artist and author of *Red Hood: The Hill,* he is next adapting Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* for Dark Horse Comics.

BROOKES: COURTESY OF MATTHEW BROOKES. DI GIOVANNI: RANNJAN JOAWN. CIRALSKY: NORMAN JEAN ROY. GREENSPAN: COURTESY OF STELLA GREENSPAN. PATERNOSTRO: COURTESY OF SILVANA PATERNOSTRO. MARTINBROUGH: COURTESY OF SHAWN MARTINBROUGH.

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AWARDS 2024

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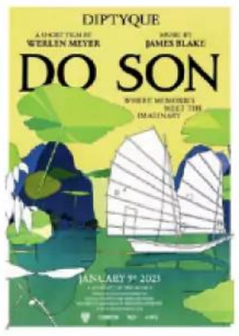
BEST NEW FRAGRANCE IN NATIONAL DISTRIBUTION
Tom Ford, Café Rose



BEST NEW FRAGRANCE
Acqua di Parma, Zafferano & Diptyque, L'Eau Papier



ULTIMATE LAUNCH
Yves Saint Laurent, MYSLF



BEST NEW MEDIA CAMPAIGN
Diptyque, Do Son Limited Edition



BEST NEW DESIGN & PACKAGING
Penhaligon's Potions & Remedies Collection



BEST NEW INTERIOR FRAGRANCE
Byredo, Summer Rain



BEST NEW INDEPENDENT FRAGRANCE
Vyrao, Sun Rae



READERS' CHOICE
Billie Eilish, Eilish No.2



PEOPLE'S CHOICE
Burberry Goddess EDP

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BEAUTY

NEWCOMER
Victoria Beckham Beauty



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Ella K, Camélia K by Sonia Constant

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VANITY

IES

VANITAS VANITATUM

NICHOLAS GALITZINE kicks into high gear

By Britt Hennemuth

Photographs by Nick Riley Bentham

Nicholas Galitzine has built a career playing princes. Opposite a female pop star, an all-American himbo, and an Academy Award–winning actress, Galitzine brings particular depth to even the frothiest of projects. Now, with a wicked turn playing a deceitful son opposite Julianne Moore in *Mary & George* (Starz) and depicting a Harry Styles–esque singer in *The Idea of You* with Anne Hathaway, Galitzine shows no signs of slowing down. "I feel like I've been threatening to launch for a while.

I'm revving the engine of the car, but we haven't quite taken off yet." This summer, that's all about to change.

BORN IN South West London to an entrepreneurial father and Greek financier mother, "being an actor was like joining the circus."
THE RUGBY STUD was close to going professional, but injuries benched him for his final year of secondary school. After overcoming stage fright in the ensemble of *Guys & Dolls*, he followed friends and "a girl who I was really into at the time" to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival for "a last hurrah before we all went our separate ways. Going up to Scotland, getting shit-faced, doing plays."
SUCCESS CAME QUICKLY. Galitzine caught the eye of an agent, but his costars had less luck. "I felt a huge amount of impostor syndrome. I went from having never acted before to being the lead of a movie in the space of two months, which was really, really bizarre."
ON ADJUSTING TO FAME around his friends: "I felt like, 'Was I gloating?' or 'Was it too self-deprecating?' It just felt like this impossible task. But then over time, the more comfortable I got in my skin."
SINCE THEN his hot streak has continued, blowing past the limits usually in place for the heartthrob. "It's been so validating to see and hear people noticing the versatility in my work."
HIS TURN as the psychotic high school quarterback Jeff in the sapphic comedy *Bottoms* proved to be an unforgettable experience. "We joked, 'God must hate the gays,' because we had to deal with locusts, lightning, and torrential storms to finish this brilliant movie. We were bonded for life in the sweltering heat of New Orleans wearing skintight American football uniforms."
IN *THE IDEA OF YOU*, Galitzine and Hathaway were clear about making the pulpy fanfic serve a purpose. "We both viewed the intimacy as integral to the storyline but not salacious. I think female pleasure has been reduced to the sidelines for so long, and it felt like we were on a mission to really make an important movie for women turning 40 and later on, and just giving women a sense of ownership and empowerment. And that sounds almost silly to say, but that's where we've been. I think as an industry, we have needed to improve upon the implicit misogyny that I think has existed. We just work really well together. I think it's because we share a lot of values and we just really get on."
HIS TRIP to SXSW with *The Idea of You* was particularly moving. The fans' enthusiasm left Hathaway in tears. As for Galitzine, "It's filling me with confidence, a quiet confidence." ■



Shirt by **Hermès;** jeans by **Nili Lotan.** Previous spread: clothing by **Tom Ford;** boots by **Jimmy Choo.** Throughout: hair products by **R+Co;** grooming products by **YSL Beauty.** Styled by Jake Sammis.



Flash Dance

For photographer Tyler Mitchell, summer's no vacation.

Tyler Mitchell has been making art at a breakneck pace since 2018, when he photographed Beyoncé for *Vogue* and became the first Black photographer to lens the cover. Summer will be a landmark season for the 29-year-old, with shows at C/O Berlin and the High Museum of Art, in his native Atlanta. Opening June 1, Mitchell's exhibit in Berlin will showcase his imagery alongside work by his friends and contemporaries, including painter and sculptor Rashid Johnson and fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner, "to convey the lineage of not only Black image makers and photographers, but Black artists, and the multiple modes of expression that are possible around contemporary ideas of Black life," Mitchell said. Come June 21, the High Museum of Art will explore the ethos of his image making. His solo show there will be the first-ever full photography show installed in the museum's Stent Wing Special Exhibition galleries: "Seeing my show in proximity to, say, a painting show next door, or the European collections, could create some interesting conflicts and dialogues."

—**NATE FREEMAN**

GROOMING, CANDICE BIRNS; TAILOR, YELENA TRAVKINA; SET DESIGN, COLIN PHELAN. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY JN PRODUCTION. *NEW HORIZONS II*: TYLER MITCHELL. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

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Butterfly mules.
(Similar styles from
Valentino boutiques
nationwide)

Photograph by
SUZANNE SAROFF

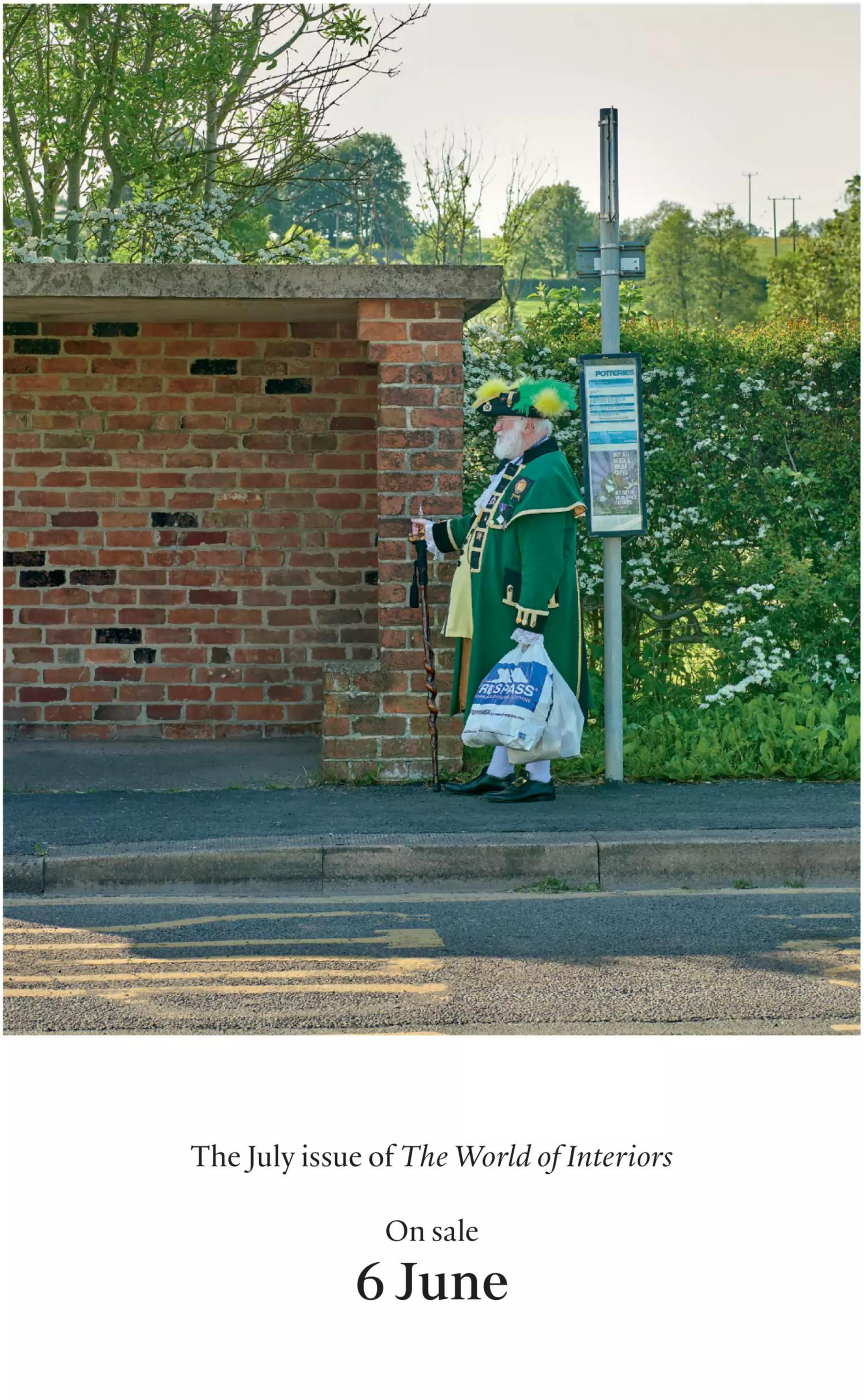
SET DESIGN, BETIM BALAMAN. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

On the WINGS OF LOVE

In 1967, after years spent harnessing a rainbow of color, Valentino Garavani showed a collection in white, beige, and ivory. Today, as his namesake Italian fashion house prepares to evolve from the creative direction of the beloved Pierpaolo Piccioli to that of virtuoso Alessandro Michele, the palette remains. These refined leather slides are minimal and modern but still embrace feminine frivolity with butterfly embellishments taking flight. As the brand undergoes its own metamorphosis, they're a chic reminder of just how beautiful change can be.
—Daisy Shaw-Ellis

The World of Exteriors

Oyez, oyez, oyez! Harken to these tidings…
The wait for our outdoor extravaganza – greenery! scenery! – is almost over



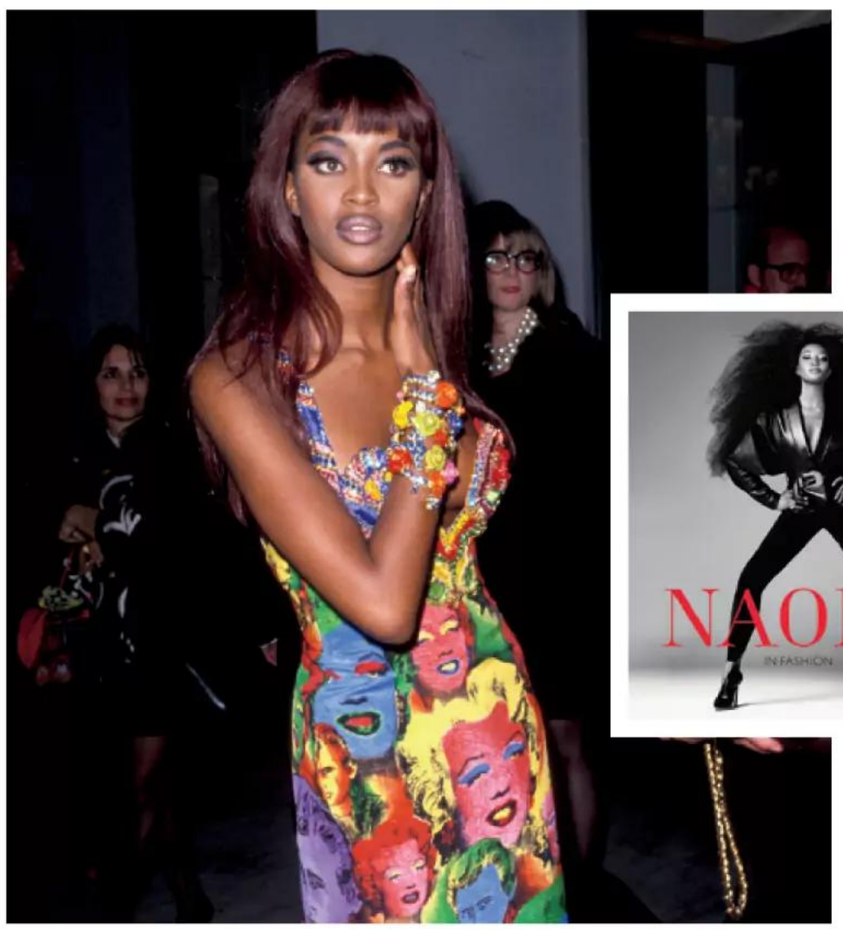
BILL LOMAS, LEEK TOWN CRIER, WAITING FOR THE BUS EN ROUTE TO ENDON WELL DRESSING, 30 MAY 2023. PHOTOGRAPH: HENRY BOURNE

The July issue of *The World of Interiors*

On sale
6 June

Role MODEL

NAOMI CAMPBELL and her 40-year career are immortalized in *Naomi: In Fashion,* which accompanies an exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. On display: pieces from Campbell's archive alongside highlights from her fight for diversity in the industry, and of her relationships with designers





Naomi Campbell wears a multicolored Gianni Versace gown in February 1991.

STRIKE A POSE

1. Loro Piana hat, £765. (uk.loropiana.com)
2. Balmain jacket, £1,984. (int.balmain.com/en)
3. Valentino shirt, £2,890. (Valentino boutiques)
4. Pat McGrath Labs lip pencil in Belle Amour, £27. (patmcgrath.com)
5. Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello top, £1,480. (ysl.com/en-gb)
6. Gucci sunglasses, £340. (gucci.com/uk)
7. Versace dress, £3,843. (selected Versace boutiques) **8. David Yurman** necklace, £2,850. (davidyurman.com/eu/home) **9. Prada** top, £820. (prada.com/gb)
10. Naomi x Boss coat, £489. (hugoboss.com/uk)
11. Nars blush in Orgasm X, £31. (narscosmetics.co.uk/en) **12. Mateo** choker, £3,700. (lisbon.mateonewyork.com)
13. Ami skirt, £1,140. (amiparis.com/uk)
14. *Naomi in Fashion: Naomi Campbell,* edited by Sonnet Stanfill and Elisabeth Murray, £52. (rizzolibookstore.com)
15. Alaïa shoes, £1,090. (maison-alaia.com/gb)
16. The Row bag, £4,910. (The Row stores)
17. Uzo serum, £90. (uzobeauty.com)

VERSACE: JOSEPHINE SCHIELE; STYLING BY KRIS JENSEN. CAMPBELL: GETTY IMAGES. BOOK: COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHER. ALL OTHERS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

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Track RECORD

Julie Mehretu joins a select list of 20 artists who have made fine art out of fast cars *By Brett Berk*

BMW'S LATEST ART Car almost didn't come into existence, says its creator, Julie Mehretu. "I actually tried to turn it down."

It's not that she wasn't interested. The abstract artist has long been a fan of the program, which began nearly 50 years ago and has featured collaborations with such luminaries as Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Jenny Holzer, David Hockney, Alexander Calder, Cao Fei, Roy Lichtenstein, Esther Mahlangu, Jeff Koons, and Robert Rauschenberg. And she was honored to be chosen by an independent international jury of top curators and other art world leaders.

But she was stumped. "I didn't know how to even approach the idea," she says. "This was totally out of my imagination, painting a car."

Attending a race with BMW changed her perspective. There, she witnessed the spirit of cocreation among the engineers, designers, drivers, and crew. This resonated artistically. "It's about making dreams," Mehretu says. "It's fully about pursuing something in the imagination, and in physics, that is just about the possibility of what could be."

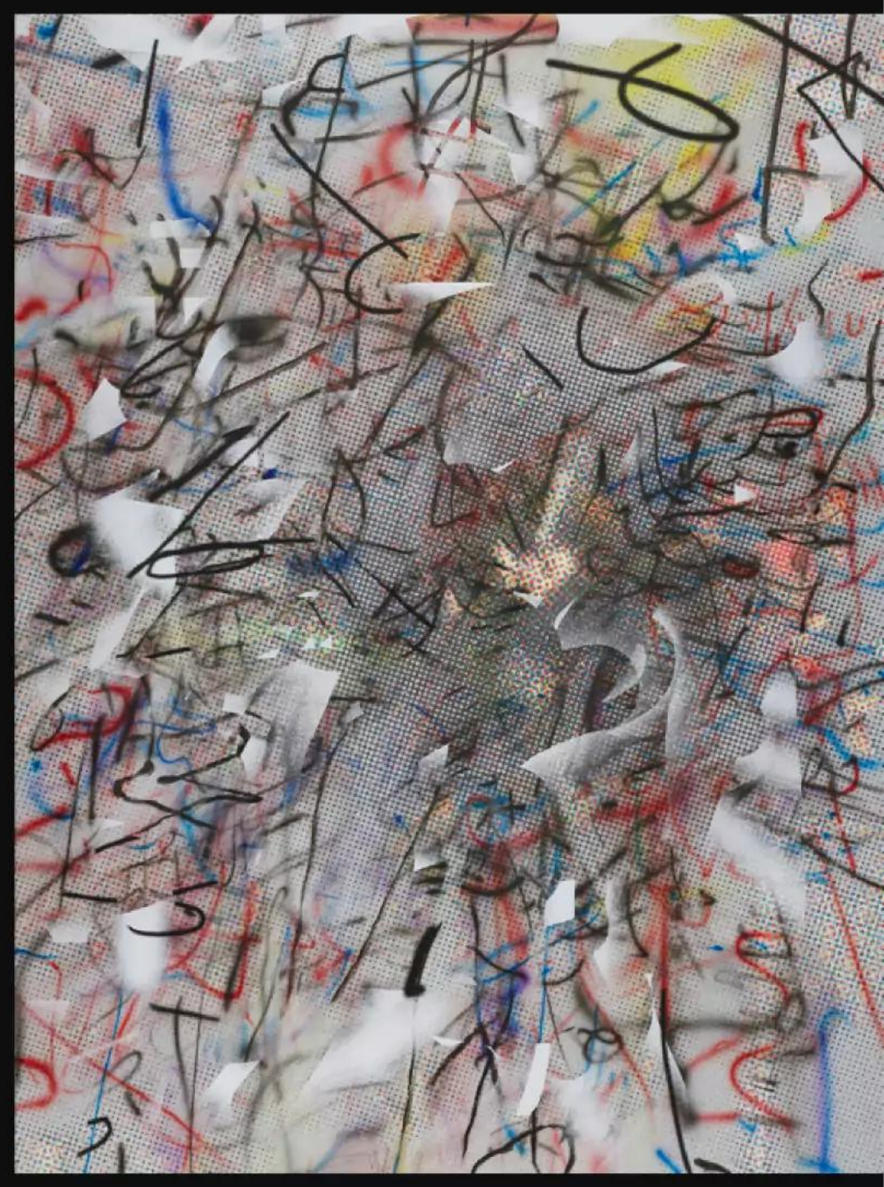
Like its forebears, her Art Car uses as its "canvas" a BMW race car, in this case the automaker's menacing M Hybrid V8. Mehretu's design is an original work, inspired in part by her large-scale painting *Everywhen,* which



employs her signature phantasmic cartographic symbols that pierce geopolitical orthodoxies surrounding race, colonialism, and power.

But the adaptive process wasn't as simple as wrapping the car in the artwork. She wanted the vehicle to feel as if it transversed the painting, "as if the painting was a portal," appearing "like it's glitching" when still but a "fluid blur" when moving.

Opportunities to view the work at speed will arise in June, when the car participates in the famed 24 Hours of Le Mans endurance race in France. There, on the track, it will "earn its spurs, its badge of honor," as a race car, says Thomas Girst, BMW's head of cultural engagement, before entering BMW's permanent collection.

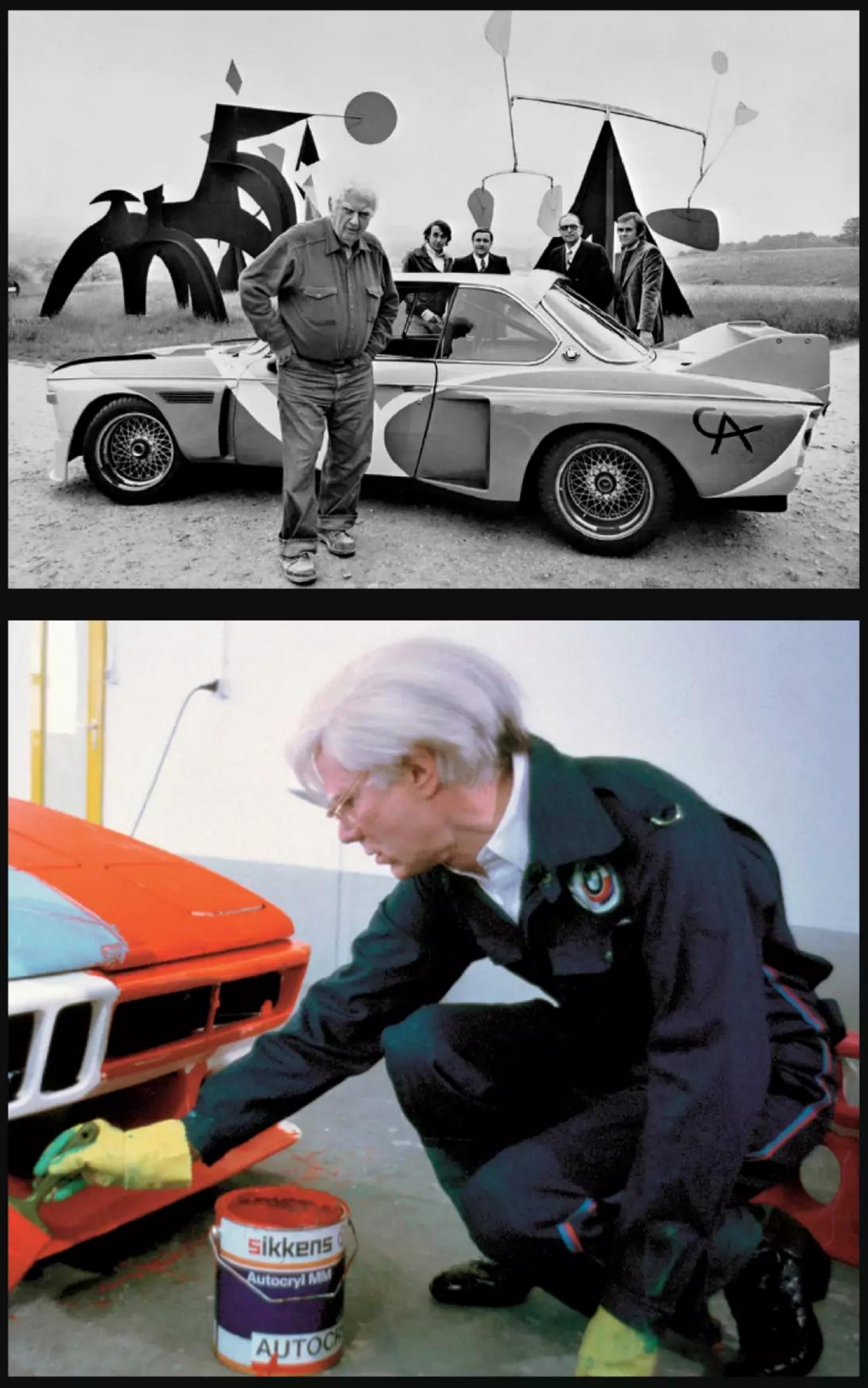


Previous artists have had similarly amalgamative experiences. "It's past the scale of just playing an instrument or making an arrangement and playing it. It's being able to have that performed by an orchestra," says Koons of creating his 2010 car, an M3 GT2 covered in eruptions of bright color. "It's like being able to participate in something that is conducted."

This spirit of collaboration will persevere through 2025, when Mehretu cohosts a pan-African artistic workshop series aimed at communally producing, as she says, "indigenous, individual, local content, generated and made by and for Africans." The outcome of these gatherings will be shown, along with her Art Car, at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) in Cape Town late next year.

"It's going to be an abstract caravan," says Koyo Kouoh, executive





MEHRETU; JOSEFINA SANTOS. PAINTING: JULIE MEHRETU, *WHEN ANGELS SPEAK OF LOVE (BARCELONA)*, 2018, INK AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 80 INCHES BY 60 INCHES; TOM POWEL IMAGING/PRIVATE COLLECTION/COURTESY OF MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY © JULIE MEHRETU. ALL OTHERS: COURTESY OF BMW.

director of Zeitz MOCAA, of the nine-month, eight-city project. "Julie being such a powerful abstract artist, we needed to construct the idea of the caravan itself in ways that make it more interesting, more challenging, more generative."

The Art Car could have disruptive reverberations in Mehretu's own work as well. "Julie says herself that her Art Car is a shout-out to Frank Stella," says Girst of Stella's scrawl-pierced graph-patterned 1976 3.0 CSL. "I always tell her that Stella was a two-dimensional artist before his Art Car, and it turned him into a three-dimensional artist." The pioneering minimalist, who died in May, "became a sculptor," Girst says, "after creating a BMW Art Car." ■

Alexander Calder with his Art Car, the brand's first, in 1975; Andy Warhol painting a BMW M1, 1979. Opposite, from top: Julie Mehretu's *When Angels Speak of Love (Barcelona)*, 2018; Mehretu; the artist's BMW M Hybrid V8.



V12 LMR by **Jenny Holzer,** 1999



M3 GT2 by **Jeff Koons,** 2010



320i Turbo by **Roy Lichtenstein,** 1977



3.0 CSL by **Alexander Calder,** 1975



850 CSi by **David Hockney,** 1995



M3 Group A by **Michael Jagamara Nelson,** 1989







Wild CARD

From serpentine diamonds to a garden full of fresh blooms, creative director LAURA KIM has a penchant for the nature of things

■ ***Style File***

EVENING SHOE: Amina Muaddi (7). **STATEMENT BAG:** Oscar de la Renta (15). **EYEWEAR:** Gentle Monster (6). **WRIST CANDY:** Bulgari (1). **CLOSET TREASURE:** A vintage Mickey Mouse sweatshirt.

■ ***On Beauty***

FACE MASK: 111Skin (2). **SIGNATURE LIP:** MAC MACximal lipstick (14). **BODY CARE:** U Beauty (3).

■ ***At Home***

RECENT ADDITION: D-Haene Studio by Jane Yang-D'Haene moon jar (8). **ON THE WALL:** Ethan Cook (4). **THE UNEXPECTED:** A notepad that looks like real butter on a Christofle butter tray (16). **SEATING:** Atra (5). **INDOOR PLANTERS:** Vintage olive jars. **GROWING IN THE GARDEN:** Herbs, edible flowers, shiso leaves, zucchini, tomatoes, and passion fruit flowers (9). **ALFRESCO TABLEWARE:** My new collection with Crate & Barrel (13).

■ ***For Pleasure***

READING: *The Secret Life of Sunflowers* by Marta Molnar (12). **WATCHING:** K-dramas. **DOING:** Anything and everything. **LISTENING TO:** Whatever my team is obsessing over.

INSPIRED BY: My agent, Chloe, who appreciates everything in life. She helps me to remember to do the same—kind of makes you invincible when anything tough comes along. Also, my friends being so vulnerable and open about anything amongst us. You realize how important that is to being grounded.

■ ***The Menu***

MORNING BEVERAGE: Lemon Fiji water and beet ginger juice. **COMFORT FOOD:** Pho or Shin Ramyun instant noodles. **INDULGENT SNACK:** Strawberry Pocky (11). **REVOLVING DINNER RESERVATION:** Atomix (10). **HOME-COOKED SPECIALTY:** Seed crackers, steamed fish, and bitter green salad. On rare days, we make kimchi pancakes or fried chicken.

KIM: PHILIPP PAULUS; LOCATION, ROCKEFELLER CENTER. POCKY, FLOWER: GETTY IMAGES. BOOK: COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHER. PAINTING: ETHAN COOK. ALL OTHERS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

The LYRICIST

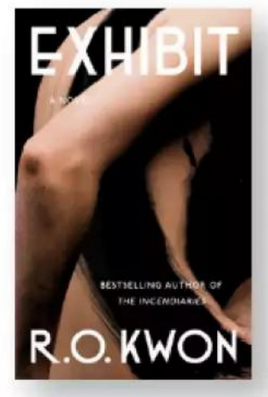
In her debut poetry collection, JOAN BAEZ contends with a life spent in the spotlight

A FORMIDABLE VOICE since her days in the '60s-era folk and protest movements, Joan Baez has embarked on a new journey of introspection. Her autobiographical debut poetry collection, *When You See My Mother, Ask Her to Dance* (Godine), chronicles her life and rise to fame, from grappling with the trappings of celebrity to navigating the relationships she built along the way, whether it was with her contemporaries, family, or Bob Dylan. Though the Grammy-nominated singer and songwriter has been writing for decades, the 120-page collection—which comprises poems written "during the same seven or eight years when I was in recovery from sexual abuse and et cetera," she told *Vanity Fair*—marks the first time she's sharing her poetry publicly. "I put everything away until I was thinking of making this book. I had to go all over my house and property and office and storage unit to find bits and pieces of it, and that took a long time," she said. "And then I got very excited about it because I had forgotten the poems and, honestly, how good they are." Beyond the page, Baez's artistry takes shape in various media. Over the years, she says, her creativity "comes and goes on its own time. For instance, my painting arrived out of nowhere. I was looking at someone's gallery of paintings and thought, Oh, I could do that." While on the road, she set up canvases on the vanity in her tour bus. "I did that fanatically for a number of years. Most of the stuff that shows up is a challenge, and when I accept it as a challenge, I really love it."

—ROB LEDONNE



Joan Baez, photographed with some of her creative pursuits.



On a Limb

A photographer at a marital crossroads finds her muse in an injured ballerina in R.O. Kwon's crackling, sensual *Exhibit* (Virago). Here, Kwon shares her inspirations.



"FAST CAR"
Tracy Chapman, 1988
"I usually listen to one or two songs on repeat while I write, and 'Fast Car' is a song I've looped often. Its story of love pursued and love broken is powerful every time I hear it, and then there's that astonishing voice."



SHOSTAKOVICH TRILOGY
Alexei Ratmansky, 2013
While watching Ratmansky's ballets for the first time, "I felt as though the dancing bodies onstage were talking directly to corresponding parts of my body, cell to cell. It was an ecstatic experience, one that soon led me to *Exhibit*'s story of a woman who becomes infatuated with a ballerina."



THE BROTHERS SUN
Netflix, 2024
Kwon calls the show about a triad family "spellbinding, hilarious, and hard to forget. I'm intensely moved by its explorations of a question I follow in my own fiction: What might you risk to pursue your core desires?"

BAEZ: JUSTIN KANEPS. *THE BROTHERS SUN*: NETFLIX. CHAPMAN: COURTESY OF THE LABEL. RATMANSKY'S CHAMBER SYMPHONY: COURTESY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BALLET. BOOKS: COURTESY OF THE PUBLISHERS.

SIX PACK The lives of writers, time travel, and more page-turners



BIRD MILK & MOSQUITO BONES
Kashmir-born Priyanka Mattoo details her life in spry essays that include such horrors as a great-aunt's violent death but also find boundless joy: kids' word choices, a family recipe. (Knopf)



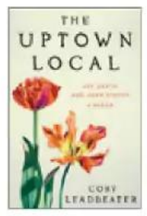
FIRE EXIT
Morgan Talty's pensive, probing debut novel circles a decades-old family rift centering around tribal lineage on Maine's Penobscot Reservation, which separates a father from his child. (And Other Stories)



WIVES LIKE US
A sought-after butler employed by an Oxfordshire wife keeps the Thomas Goode sugar bowls polished and the Instagram influencers in check in Plum Sykes's glossy comedy of manners. (Bloomsbury)



THE MEMO
In Rachel Dodes and Lauren Mechling's clever time warp, a mysterious consortium allows Jenny Green to revisit key moments that have contributed to her "suboptimal" life—and redo them. (Renegade)



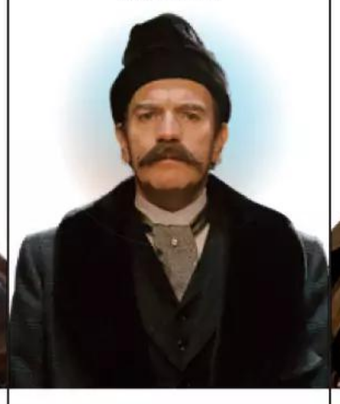
UPTOWN LOCAL
For the final nine years of Joan Didion's life, Cory Leadbeater worked as her assistant. Intimately, he describes her endless tissues and delight in children, his complicated family, their shared love of Auden. (Fleet)



THOM GUNN: A COOL QUEER LIFE
Michael Nott, coeditor of Thom Gunn's letters, paints a keen portrait of the poet, from his psychedelic life in Haight-Ashbury to thoughtful dives into his body of work. (Faber & Faber) —*Keziah Weir*

Father LAND

Middle-aged men have never exactly been underserved by Hollywood, but TV has gone overboard this year—offering a smorgasbord of muscular historical fiction series tailor-made for dads *By Hillary Busis*

	Shōgun FX	*Franklin* Apple TV+	*Masters of the Air* Apple TV+	*A Gentleman in Moscow* Paramount+ with Showtime	*The Sympathizer* HBO	*Manhunt* Apple TV+
THE SHOW						
	17th-century Japan dad	Revolutionary War dad	World War II dad	Russian Revolution dad	Vietnam War dad	Civil War dad
THE MEN	Yoshii Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada), a feudal lord with enemies around every corner	Michael Douglas as Benjamin Franklin in France 	Ncuti Gatwa, Austin Butler, Callum Turner, and more as brave airmen	Alexander Rostov (Ewan McGregor), a count under Bolshevik house arrest	A double agent for North Vietnam known only as The Captain (Hoa Xuande) 	Edwin Stanton (Tobias Menzies), in hot pursuit of John Wilkes Booth (Anthony Boyle)
THE VIBE	Grand and sweeping, even when heads are literally rolling 	What don't you get? It's Michael Douglas. As Benjamin Franklin. In France.	*Band of Brothers: The New Class* 	Chilly and refined, with a dab of caviar on top 	Alternately darkly comic and just plain dark	*Lincoln* minus Lincoln (and Steven Spielberg) 
MUSTACHE QUOTIENT	Powerful yet dignified	Minimal, though the powdered wig budget must be through the roof	Strangely weak. Do they carry Dopp kits on those planes? 	Strong, like bull	Present but understated, as befits a spy 	Absolutely off the charts 
BECHDEL RATING	Healthy! Anna Sawai's Lady Mariko is a full-fledged main character.	Comme ci, comme ça 	Generally, Rosies are doing their riveting offscreen.	Women pop up—including a film star played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead—but it's Rostov's show.	Eh. Female characters tend to be martyrs or love interests. 	Well, it's not called *Womanhunt*.
FOR DADS WHO...	...think ordering a lite beer is a sign of weakness 	...vastly prefer Wawa to Sheetz and need everyone to know it	...happen to love this country, dammit! 	...wouldn't be caught dead in athleisure	...have incredible secrets you'll learn only many years from now, if ever	...would risk it all for one meal with Doris Kearns Goodwin 

SHŌGUN: FX. *FRANKLIN*, *MASTERS OF THE AIR*, *MANHUNT*: APPLE TV+. *A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW*: PARAMOUNT+. *THE SYMPATHIZER*: HBO. ALL OTHERS: GETTY IMAGES.

JOIN THE *Club*

Zafiro Palace Andratx has elevated its already luxurious offering with a new concept

BECKONING FROM THE sun-dappled southwest of Mallorca, surrounded by undulating hills and craggy, cove-dotted coastline, the all-suite Zafiro Palace Andratx has already cemented its position on the luxury lust list for travellers heading to the Balearics. Since it opened its doors in 2021, it's widely considered to have set the bar for all-inclusive hotels on the island, charming guests with its exclusive ambience, sleek design and consistently impressive restaurants.

But now, this five-star Mallorcan name-to-know has surpassed even its own high standards with the unveiling of a new concept: Zafiro Club. Currently exclusive to Zafiro Palace Andratx, this service has been designed to elevate the hotel experience for the most discerning guests. It centres around a selection of very special suites located in the most sought-after and peaceful part of the coastal property, with sprawling views of the Sierra de Tramuntana mountains and Camp de Mar bay.





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The indulgence starts from check in, with Zafiro Club guests enjoying a dedicated welcome and personalised process, all carried out from the comfort of a plush sofa with a glass of champagne in hand. Then, it's on to the suite, where a bottle of wine, fresh flowers, Jo Loves products and other surprises await.

AIMING HIGHER

This service has been designed to elevate the hotel experience for the most discerning guests.

A highlight of a Zafiro Club stay is access to a private pool and bar with a menu that's not available anywhere else in the property. There's also access to a special room service menu and enhanced minibar with premium-quality drinks. Heightened relaxation comes in the form of a 50-minute massage for two at The Gem by Germaine de Capuccini Spa and a romantic dinner for two—both of which are included in a stay.

When the time comes to (reluctantly) leave, there will be a special farewell gift and, most importantly, the chance for a late check out.

For more information, please visit zafirohotels.com

Beyond a BOUNDARY

With sped-up matches and a bevy of big-money backers, cricket is pitching an American resurgence

By Craig Coyne



Major League Cricket's investors hope international stars like Dwayne Bravo (West Indies), Haris Rauf (Pakistan), and Faf du Plessis (South Africa) can score in the US.

LAST TIME CRICKET dominated American sporting culture, cholera was booming, Millard Fillmore was our nation's most famous person, and trad wives were known, I'm guessing, just as wives.

Since then, cricket has gone bananas...most everywhere else. Said to have originated as a children's game in medieval England, it currently ranks as the second most popular sport in the world after soccer, with an estimated fan base of roughly 2.5 billion people. It's almost a religion in South Asia, especially India, and also caters to massive crowds in Australia, South Africa, the UK, and elsewhere. Here in the US, meanwhile, a typical sports fan can tell you, at the absolute most, two things about the game: that matches can last up to five days and that, even then, they can *still* end in a tie.

Now a coterie of big-money backers including Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, Adobe CEO Shantanu Narayen, and Access Healthcare chairman Anurag Jain are looking to change that. All three have invested in Major League Cricket, the US men's pro league that launched with six teams last summer.

An additional Stateside boost is expected this June, when the International Cricket Council hosts the biennial Men's T20 World Cup in the US and the West Indies. Then, in 2028, cricket will make its first Olympic appearance since 1900 at the Summer Games in Los Angeles.

To understand why cricket appears on the cusp of a comeback in the United States—long after George Washington is said to have taken a few swings at Valley Forge—we should look at why it disappeared. With shorter games and less equipment, baseball surpassed cricket as a way for Civil War soldiers to pass their downtime. After Lee surrendered at Appomattox, those men returned to their hometowns and evangelized what would become known as America's pastime.

In today's age of constant stimulation and compressed attention spans, Major League Baseball is fighting its own battle for relevance. New rules introduced before the 2023 season aimed to speed up play and appeal to younger fans. But a full two decades before the pitch clock, cricket responded to dwindling crowds by inventing an entirely new format known as Twenty20, or T20. Promising an action-packed three-hour competition in which ties are almost unheard of, T20 reinvigorated cricket interest around the globe.

The upcoming Men's T20 World Cup might just break international viewership records, and domestic audiences appear suitably intrigued. Tickets to the sold-out match between India and Pakistan on June 9 in New York have been selling on StubHub for upwards of $5,000. After a new world champion is crowned a few weeks later in Barbados, many of the game's top

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KHOA TRAN. SOURCE IMAGES, BRAVO: GARETH COPLEY-ICC/ICC. RAUF: HARRY TRUMP-ECB/ECB. DU PLESSIS: VISHAL BHATNAGAR/NUR PHOTO. ALL: GETTY IMAGES.

international players—including South Africa's Faf du Plessis, Pakistan's Haris Rauf, and Afghanistan's Rashid Khan—will stick around for season two of Major League Cricket.

In the league's inaugural season, MI New York (an affiliate of the Indian Premier League's Mumbai Indians) defeated the Seattle Orcas in the championship match before a capacity crowd at Grand Prairie Stadium outside Dallas. This newly renovated cricket-specific facility, home to the Texas Super Kings, seats 7,200 spectators and meets the highest levels of international accreditation. But it's one of only two venues that hosted matches in Major League Cricket's first season. The second? A temporary stadium located in Morrisville, North Carolina...hundreds of miles from the nearest MLC franchise. (The remaining three clubs are based in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and DC.)

As the shortage of playing grounds suggests, Major League Cricket faces considerable headwinds. A grueling international cricket calendar forces MLC to fight for talent as the sport moves its best players around the globe and among the top leagues. To make matters worse, its multi-week season conflicts directly with England's professional season, while stars of the Indian Premier League—the sport's preeminent pro league—are forbidden from moonlighting on other T20 circuits. And then there's the challenge of luring American viewers, virtually all of whom are uninitiated in the ways of wickets and whites, away from the more familiar pleasures of Major League Baseball, Wimbledon, and the Tour de France.

If Major League Cricket sounds like a moon shot, however, you're looking at only half the picture. The league exists thanks to the fanaticism and efforts of 20 big-brained and deep-pocketed investors—a who's who of business executives, tech entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists. These guys are all in. From former CTO of Dropbox Aditya Agarwal to Perot Group chairman Ross Perot Jr., it's a group you'd be unwise to bet against. Those who grew up abroad have approached this project with a love for the sport they've had since childhood—and with resources they mostly have not.

"Major League Cricket has untold potential," says Asser Malik, an aficionado who has worked with the Pakistan Cricket Board and even launched his own line of cricket gear. "The challenge is at the grassroots level. Better facilities are needed to improve both the quality and quantity of cricketers in the country. A lot of work needs to be done, but the potential reward is massive."

> "Major League Cricket has **UNTOLD POTENTIAL.** The challenge is at the grassroots level."

Earlier attempts to launch an American professional cricket league had run aground, but Anurag Jain, co-owner of the Texas Super Kings, became convinced that success was possible after a former classmate launched Willow TV, a pay channel that airs cricket 24/7, in 2010. The US soon became the channel's fourth largest audience base, ahead of cricket-centric countries like New Zealand.

When Jain approached his business partner Perot with an idea to bring cricket to Dallas, Perot replied simply, "Of course." Without understanding the game's intricacies, Perot understood its power. While working in India in the '90s, Perot discovered that "whenever there was a big cricket game, my Indian colleagues would disappear and I couldn't find them." Soon enough, these two helped form a consortium of cricket impresarios that raised $120 million to launch Major League Cricket.

How did the first season go? All Texas Super Kings matches sold out, converting new cricket fans around the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex with every hit six. The playoff crowd was standing room only. By the time MI New York were crowned champions, tens of thousands of supporters had sweated it out in the July heat of Grand Prairie, Texas, to catch the action live. Another half million followed along on social media, and 90 million households tuned in around the world. On July 25, a tumbling catch by Texas's Mitchell Santner snagged the top spot on SportsCenter's plays of the day—an honor more often reserved for a grand slam or a water-skiing squirrel.

In a nation of immigrants, perhaps it's inevitable that international sports eventually find their way into our collective consciousness. "I started playing soccer in Texas in the '60s. No one knew soccer in Texas," Perot points out. "I look at cricket like I look at soccer. Fast-forward 40 years and we'll see how big this can be." For a more recent example, consider the sudden rise of Formula 1. During the first round of Biden versus Trump, F1 was barely a blip on our sporting radar. Today, thanks in large part to Netflix's *Drive to Survive,* tour stops in cities like Austin, Miami, and Las Vegas have become the hottest ticket in town.

America has been called a land of second chances, and cricket has thrived within our borders once before. Can it happen again? There's reason for hope. And to support the cause, come November, I'll write in Millard Fillmore. ■

JUSTICE *Without Borders*

Inside the effort to prosecute Russians for Ukraine war crimes—in Argentina *By Janine di Giovanni*

THE AMERICAN PEACE advocate Norman Cousins once said, "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside of us while we live." The quote has often been linked to Ariel Dorfman's profoundly moving play, *Death and the Maiden*. Therein, a middle-class Chilean woman who is a trauma survivor, having been subjected to torture and other unspeakable torments, confronts the man who had terrorized her years earlier during her country's brutal dictatorship.

For decades, I have documented torture and war crimes, first as a journalist for *Vanity Fair* and now as executive director of the Reckoning Project (TRP), an organization that gathers evidence of the systematic horrors Ukrainians have endured since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. When survivors tell me how they managed to bear it all, a common description I have heard is that they had to kill something deep in their psyches.

How can these survivors ever hope to heal? One way—which is the main mission of TRP—is to ensure that some of those who have committed war crimes are held accountable in court. If authoritarian leaders remain in power—as in Argentina in the 1970s and '80s and in Russia today—accountability is impossible. The question then becomes how to create a legal framework so these victims and crimes don't go unnoticed.

One method gaining traction in this regard utilizes a principle known as universal jurisdiction, which allows laws to be applied to serious crimes in territories outside conflict zones. In many ways, this is justice without borders.

Consider the ongoing war in Syria. Two years ago, in Koblenz, a nondescript town on the Rhine, a verdict was handed down by a German court in the world's first criminal case involving state-sponsored torture in Syria. Anwar Raslan, a senior Syrian official, was convicted of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity and sentenced to life. It was a decisive moment in Bashar al-Assad's war, one in which civilians have been starved, gassed, or treated unspeakably. (A case against Rifaat al-Assad, an uncle of the Syrian president, for war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in 1982 will soon begin in Switzerland.)

In the past, most war crime victims have had no legal recourse. Civilian survivors of the Bosnian war of the 1990s, for example, knew they would die without ever seeing justice served; they just had to continue on, traumatized. I covered that conflict extensively, and one particular story still haunts me. I met a woman who had been held in the rape camps of Foca. When the war ended and she returned to her village, she had to see her rapists every day. She told me that with each encounter, *she* was the one who dropped her eyes in shame. And so the idea that her rapists might never be held to account was particularly cruel. The International Criminal Court and special tribunals—such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, established in 1993—work notoriously slowly; few atrocities reach the docket. In the case of the Rwandan genocide, in which at least 800,000 people were killed in the 1990s, I was told by a prosecutor that it would take 40 years to try all of those who are guilty.

But things began to shift with the Koblenz initiative. Perpetrators of heinous crimes could now be investigated—in some cases prosecuted—in foreign countries. Ukraine took notice. The level of criminality inflicted on the country's citizens has been so vast—Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin's office has identified more than 120,000 incidents—that TRP's legal experts began to consider where outside Ukraine or Russia they might plan trials against the transgressors.

Since the war began, TRP has gathered more than 300 testimonies from victims of crimes that occurred in Ukraine. In April, thanks to key stakeholders in Argentina and Ukraine, the first universal jurisdiction complaint against members of Vladimir Putin's military and its affiliates was filed in Buenos Aires. The initial case presents charges based on the testimony of one key survivor—and loads of supplemental evidence—accusing occupying soldiers of committing thousands of acts of extreme torture.

Why Argentina? Partly because of that country's painful past. During the so-called Dirty War of 1976–1983, some 30,000 Argentinians were kidnapped, tortured, and killed. One method of torture involved electrocution (also allegedly used by Russians against Ukrainian captives). Thousands of Argentinians "disappeared." Political prisoners were also pushed out of planes into the Atlantic. Today, a kind of solidarity has emerged between Ukraine and Argentina. Not only have the countries' lawyers and prosecutors shared

"I had **NEVER** seen anyone behave like that. I saw the **WORST OF HUMAN BEINGS.**"



harrowing stories, but on Ukraine's battlefields Argentinian forensic teams have been working closely with their Ukrainian counterparts to identify remains and determine causes of death.

For Ukrainian prosecutors, as well as for attorneys and investigators from TRP, many vectors have lined up for using universal jurisdiction as a mechanism for legal resolution. The Syrian and Iraq war crimes expert Raji Abdul Salam, who is TRP's chief data scientist in Ukraine, helped build the first Koblenz case. TRP's chief legal counsel, Ibrahim Olabi, is a Syrian British barrister whose work at The Hague has focused on Syrian chemical gas attacks. Argentina, meanwhile, has spent years trying defendants accused of torture. Moreover, Argentina's prosecutors have opened investigations involving alleged human rights abuses committed by Saudi Arabia against Yemeni civilians, by China in its repression of members of the Uyghur people, and by the Myanmar regime against Rohingya Muslims.

Prep work for the Ukrainian case has been laborious. Investigators and legal analysts pored over witnesses' and victims' testimonies and the corroborating evidence. Next, teams determined which victims of each complaint would be most credible—and whether they could fly to Buenos Aires to testify. Then came a review process with TRP's barrister Jack Sproson, who examined summaries of 170 horrifying testimonies.

Sproson narrowed his target sample from 50 witnesses to 20, to 5, in search of one central accuser who might provide substantive leads on perpetrators, taking into account the threshold needed to establish purported crimes fitting the legal definition of torture. At TRP's office in Kyiv, Sproson listened to their traumatic stories. Each gave compelling testimony that was consistent and reliable. Eventually, he homed in on a single witness, whom I will call Mr. M, based on the evidentiary strength of his case and his testimony having the strongest possibility of leading authorities to single out those who committed the crimes. In Mr. M's complaint he was able to identify key persons, organizations, locations, and telltale insignia on his assailants' clothing.

At the same time, another TRP lawyer, Oxford University legal scholar Tsvetelina van Benthem, flew to Buenos Aires to begin the groundwork for the case, meeting government officials, legal officers, and others. Accompanying her was Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk, part of TRP's media team, who briefed the Argentinian press and highlighted Ukraine's struggle against Russia. Now the Ukrainian team and Argentinian prosecutors are opening their investigation, hoping to pinpoint those who allegedly ran the torture facility where the main witness was held captive.

Mr. M's statement is agonizing to read. He says he was repeatedly electrocuted, then strangled, in what his captors referred to as "calling Lenin" (or "calling Putin"). "I saw lightning," he noted. "Tears and saliva started to come out. I fainted and had to be propped up.... Then they found a military baseball hat, put it on me—I think for fun—and said, 'Now we again call Lenin.'" He described his torturers in great detail. It is unlikely that those who savaged Mr. M will ever be brought before a court of law. But, in absentia, their acts and names will be revealed.

When he was released, Mr. M said he had a profound sense of "disappointment in humanity. I had never seen anyone behave like that. I saw the worst of human beings." This raises two fundamental questions: Why do people resort to such brutality in wartime? And what can be done to help alleviate the lingering agony of those who survive that brutality? Thirty years and 18 wars later, I still haven't answered the first question. But I am beginning to see how the pain of victims can be minimally assuaged. Is universal jurisdiction a perfect form of justice? No. But it is a path forward, a crucial step by which survivors can envision a form of redress. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY DEENA SO'OTEH

FLOWER GIRL

By *LEAH FAYE COOPER*

Photographs by
RENELL MEDRANO

Styled by
STELLA GREENSPAN

THE BEAR MADE AYO EDEBIRI A HOLLYWOOD DARLING. NOW SHE'S MAKING HOLLYWOOD WORTH OUR ATTENTION

“I WAS GROCERY SHOPPING YESTERDAY, AND I WAS LIKE, **‘OH MY GOD, MY LIFE’S ABOUT TO SHIFT AND I DON’T KNOW IN WHICH DIRECTION.’”**

AYO EDEBIRI IS explaining the shock of her fame to me over a spread of duck pot pie (hers) and Caesar salad topped with rib eye (mine) at Chicago’s Armitage Alehouse. (Our food belongs in this celebrity interview because, well, *The Bear.*) “I don’t know what to do about oat milk because I’m nervous about the glucose. Girls on Instagram are saying it’s spiking your glucose. I’m thinking about...going back to Lactaid.” Edebiri clips through thoughts one-on-one much as she does in her comedy—effusive and giddy, hand gestures and laughs and wide eyes punctuating every point.

Throughout dinner, the newly minted star’s hot takes include that Marshawn Lynch is “going to win a Nobel Peace Prize” one day (the former NFL running back played a teacher in Edebiri’s campy, queer coming-of-age comedy *Bottoms*), and that lying makes for the best comedy. While deliriously tired at the South by Southwest premiere for *Bottoms,* Edebiri told reporters that she was from Ireland. She’s not; she was born to a Barbadian mother and Nigerian father in Boston. But the internet ran with it, and Edebiri fully committed to the bit, with shout-outs to Ireland on numerous occasions. (And she remains committed. She told me that she has Irish relatives on both sides of her family, and who knows, maybe it’s true.) She attributes all of this to her “silly little brain.” Days after our interview, I find a selfie of Edebiri making a ridiculous face on my phone. I have no memory of her snapping it.

TICKLED PINK
Ayo Edebiri, photographed at a New Jersey estate in April.

Previous spread: clothing by **Chanel Haute Couture;** earrings by **Van Cleef & Arpels.**

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Edebiri pulled off an awards season hat trick, taking home a Golden Globe, a prime-time Emmy, and a SAG Award for her role as chef Sydney Adamu, a striver and budding genius on the FX Hulu comedy drama *The Bear.* Amid the awards run, she hosted *Saturday Night Live,* a return to form as Edebiri came up as a comic. “I feel very fortunate and still I don’t really totally believe it or understand it,” she says. And now we are back to her existential notions. “It’s special but strange; both a really intense experience but also something that I’m very grateful for. People have processed my life as having changed and have processed change in me that I have not processed myself. Does that make sense?”

Edebiri fell in love with the arts at Boston Latin—a highly competitive public school where, on the first day, she tells me, entering seventh graders are told, “Look to your left and look to your right. Only one of you will be in the final graduating class.” She initially majored in education when she arrived at NYU, intent on becoming a high school teacher.

“I was 17 when I went to college [and] I was really poor,” she says. “I was always working.” Working at a call center asking

NYU alums for money; as a babysitter for NYC families; at a student café in the math building. "I barista'd at this random coffee shop for three weeks, and then our boss was skimming money so I left, and then I did some baristing at ABC Kitchen. I loved being a barista because I like order. There's something kind of satisfying about getting it right." It wasn't long before Boston started to feel like small-town USA. "When I went back I was like, 'What is this? Am I in the sticks? We're closing businesses at 10 p.m.? I'm embarrassed.'"

The move to New York marked a shift in Edebiri's religious beliefs too. She grew up Pentecostal and church was more or less her second home. While she enjoyed singing with the youth choir and bonding with other kids, "it was horrible for my anxiety," she says. "I was petrified of death. I was petrified of the rapture." At NYU, she struggled to reconcile the Church's idea that her gay and Muslim friends wouldn't make it to heaven. "It was genuinely breaking my brain and giving me so much stress and sadness," she says. "I was just like, 'I need a break.'" Save for the occasional trip to church with her parents, she's still on one.

EDEBIRI SWITCHED HER major to dramatic writing her junior year, graduating in 2017. Stand-up sets in NYC basements and friendships forged with peers like Emma Seligman and Molly Gordon gave way to early writing, voice work, and acting opportunities on shows like *Big Mouth* and *Dickinson*. In 2020, Edebiri starred alongside her college friend and fellow comedian Rachel Sennott in the Comedy Central series *Ayo and Rachel Are Single,* based on their disastrous dating lives in NYC. One episode: The two go on a double date, only for their dates to hit it off with each other, leaving the young women still single.

When she was asked to self-tape an audition for *The Bear,* she was struck by how different the show was from the projects she'd previously been attached to. "I was in comedy land—hard, hard comedy land," she says. After landing the role opposite Jeremy Allen White, she began taking cooking classes with her castmates in Pasadena, and then traded New York for Chicago, where the show is set and filmed.

Edebiri and White play chefs and business partners in The Bear, their restaurant's name. The onscreen relationship is electric enough that a contingent of viewers is rooting for a Sydney-Carmy matchup in hotter places than a kitchen.

"We really enjoy each other in life, on camera and off camera. I have a tremendous amount of respect for her as a person, but also as an artist. And so I hope that sort of that kind of thing shines through on camera between Carm and Syd," says White, who was so eager to speak about Edebiri that he made time to talk to me within a day of being asked—which never, *ever* happens. "Syd is always able to...I don't know, to deliver something different to Carmy, and she's usually right," he adds. "And I guess I think Ayo is also usually right."

"Work can be a very intimate thing and a very personal thing and a very emotional thing, and I think when you're also in industries that are creative or creative adjacent, I think there's something that also invokes feelings of passion," Edebiri hypothesizes. "Also, boy's got some beautiful blue eyes. You know what I mean? Those are eyes you want to project onto."

"When we finished the pilot, everybody was like, 'Well, this was clearly too enjoyable of an experience and thus the actual show will not be good and we will never see each other again,'" she recalls. As millions of *Bear* fans know, that's not what happened. And the cast has stayed close: White told me that when *Bottoms* opened during the strike, to support their beloved costar, he, Lionel Boyce (who plays the show's pastry chef, Marcus), and a few other friends went with Edebiri to see it in the theater, along with civilian moviegoers. ("It was wonderful," said White, meaning both the film and that experience.)

WITH THE FAME, probably necessarily, comes the fashion. Last September, Edebiri appeared at the Loewe show dressed head to toe in the brand: a sleeveless leather puzzle-effect top, slouchy brown suede pants, Loewe's buzzy Squeeze bag, and a pair of square-frame sunglasses. Edebiri had been quietly working with the stylist Danielle Goldberg, whose clients include Laura Harrier and Greta Lee. Edebiri admired the way Goldberg had dressed Kaia Gerber, who was also in *Bottoms*.

Edebiri, who loves clothes and describes her mother as "impeccably dressed," had feelings about what her appearance would project. "We just got kind of vulnerable," she says of her initial call with Goldberg. "I was like, 'I feel very sad [because] people are telling me I'm primed to be this and I'm primed to be that, but I don't feel like it's being reflected.'" The actor worries that the frustrations she shared on that call—not being invited to certain fashion shows, not being dressed by certain designers—make her sound ungrateful. Goldberg's response to those mixed emotions, Edebiri says, was unflinching: "She was like, 'You're a leading lady, I will dress you as such.'" Goldberg delivered, putting her in Prada, Bottega, The Row, and fresh-off-the-runway Luar throughout awards season.

"We really enjoy **EACH OTHER IN LIFE,** on camera and off," says Jeremy Allen White, who was so eager to talk about his costar that he called me immediately—which *never* happens. "And so I hope that shines through **BETWEEN CARMY AND SYD.**"

Clothing by **Christopher John Rogers;** boots by **Loewe;** earrings by **Cartier.**





Dress by **Dior.**

Clothing by **Xuly.Bët;** boots by **Isabel Marant.**

The night we met, Edebiri wore a relaxed pair of jeans, a T-shirt featuring the 1966 Clint Eastwood spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,* and Converse low-tops. She arrived in a Cawley Studio leather jacket and a blue baseball cap. There's a beaded ring on her left pinkie she got from a friend, a signet with her zodiac sign on another finger—"I'm a Libra, I can weigh for a lifetime," she says of her indecision—and a gold band she got in London the day she was nominated for an Emmy.

"This is a really crazy story," she says. "I was with Will Poulter." Edebiri contemplates the name-drop of the *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* star for a minute but then says "whatever" and continues. "He is really good at not being on his phone and is just a fun person to be around. I think I knew that it was Emmys day, but I was like, 'If I'm with Will, I won't think about my phone.'" The two had lunch, went to a museum, and wandered into a jewelry shop, where she bought the ring. "Then Will was like, 'I feel like you should check your phone.'" She did, and she saw that she was nominated for an Emmy. (Lest you interpret otherwise, this does not mean they are dating—her love life being a topic of public interest is something else Edebiri is learning to navigate.)

The Bear has been nominated for seven Golden Globes, four of which it has won. For its first season alone, the show racked up 13 Emmy nominations and won 10, and for its second season, you can expect Edebiri and company to be among the nominations announced in July. ("The most joy that I feel from those awards shows are hearing her and Ebon's names," White told me, referring to their costar, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, who won a supporting actor Emmy for his role as Richie.)

That day with Poulter was the beginning of a few whirlwind months. As much as she appreciates the fandom sparked by *The Bear,* rolling with public perception has been a learning curve. When Edebiri and I leave dinner, she clocks a woman nearby trying to take her photo. Edebiri turns and wags her finger. "No, no, no—no sneaky photos," she says, before motioning for the woman to come stand beside her. I snap a proper photo of the two and they both laugh at the interaction, but not every encounter ends with a smile. "If I'm walking my dog and somebody's pulling over their car, I'm scared because I'm a woman walking alone, and then they're like, 'You're not nice,'" Edebiri says. I ask if she was ever the person pining for a shot. "Of course," she says, recalling the day, years ago, when she had a celebrity sighting at the Strand bookstore in New York. "I was like, 'I'm so sorry to do this, but are you Richard Ayoade?' And he was like, 'Yes' and then immediately turned away and left. That was both horrible and deeply amazing. He just wanted to be alone in a bookstore, but I was so starstruck, I had to say something."

AS A GEN Z cusper, Edebiri is acutely aware of how fickle audiences can be. "People could like me today and hate me tomorrow, and then like me two weeks after," she says. In late January, Edebiri prophesied to a reporter, "It's coming." She meant the inevitable moment when something she said or did would tarnish her shiny image. And it happened sooner than she thought.

In the week leading up to her *SNL* gig, a clip surfaced online from a 2020 podcast episode in which Edebiri likened Jennifer Lopez's career to a scam. Lopez happened to be the musical guest on the show, and an awkward tabloid brouhaha ensued. To Edebiri, the media's suggestion that the comments sparked a beef was absurd; it wasn't a fair matchup. "That would be like Mr. Bean and Mick Jagger beefing," she says, "and I'm obviously Mr. Bean. She's J.Lo!" On *SNL,* Edebiri poked fun at the ordeal in a sketch, and days later, Lopez told a reporter that the actor had apologized before the show. "She was very chill and nice about it," Edebiri says.

In the end, the gossip mill's glare didn't outshine what hosting that night meant to Edebiri. "*SNL* is something that in my bones, I dreamed of as a comedian, as a young kid. That to me is a pinnacle of success." Being the daughter of immigrants, she says, can make it hard to sit still with each accomplishment. "You're like, 'Okay, sure, I have this, but that's just a means to get to this next step.' And it's constantly moving, the barometer of success."

There have been some devastating lows too. Throughout 2023, if she wasn't working in Chicago or Los Angeles, or visiting her family in Boston, she was in Brooklyn, spending time with one of her closest friends, Alexis Berner-Coe, who went by Alex and was sick with cancer. "The days were just supremely awful," Edebiri says. The two met through friends as freshmen at NYU. Alex died in October—a heartbreaking reminder to Edebiri to make the most of every day. "If I'm not living my life to the fullest and just trying to be positive and enjoy it and leave things better than they found it, then it's kind of useless."

By the time Edebiri and I reconnect via Zoom, *The Bear* has been renewed for a fourth season, to be filmed consecutively with season three. It's just one of several projects in which Edebiri will soon appear. In *Omni Loop,* a comedic sci-fi exploring time travel that premiered at South by Southwest in March,

To Edebiri, the media's suggestion that her J.Lo comments sparked a **BEEF WAS ABSURD;** it wasn't a fair matchup. "That would be like **MR. BEAN AND MICK JAGGER** beefing," she says. "I'm Mr. Bean!"



Dress by
Giambattista Valli Haute Couture;
rings by **Retrouvaí.**

she stars alongside Mary-Louise Parker, "an actress that I have always been in awe with," Edebiri tells me. Also on deck is *Opus,* a horror film written and directed by former *GQ* editor and style columnist Mark Anthony Green. ("Iconic Morehouse man," I say when Green's name comes up. "Morehouse king," Edebiri replies.)

"She's one of those very few talents that, in a world where we can't agree on shit, we can agree that Ayo Edebiri is outrageously talented," says Green. The two met through their mutual friend Boyce (a.k.a., Marcus). "I remember thinking this is one of the funniest people that I've ever met," Green says of their introduction, during which he, Edebiri, and Boyce went to see *No Time to Die* in New York. Months later, when Green saw Edebiri in *The Bear* screeners Boyce had shared with him, he knew immediately that he wanted to cast her. "I can't stress this enough: She doesn't do a bad take," Green says. "She could do a wrong take [but] every choice that she makes is cinematic." The film, which features Juliette Lewis, Amber Midthunder, and John Malkovich, was filmed in New Mexico. ("I loved working with John," Edebiri says. "I felt like every day was acting school.") And then there's *Ella McCay,* a comedy from James L. Brooks featuring Emma Mackey as the lead, with Albert Brooks, Jamie Lee Curtis, Rebecca Hall, Woody Harrelson, and Kumail Nanjiani. The Rhode Island set was a reunion of sorts for Edebiri and Curtis, who crossed paths while Curtis guest starred as Carmy's mom on season two of *The Bear.* Though they didn't have any scenes together, Edebiri had been on set shadowing the show's creator, Christopher Storer, as he directed Curtis's scenes.

"We were sitting on a staircase together talking about loving the work of an actor, but also the work of the director," Curtis tells me over the phone. Edebiri asked Curtis how she likes to be directed. "I'm not an intellectual, so I don't need a lot of words; you could just whisper in my ear a color, which would then change my performance," Curtis had told Edebiri. The next day, between takes of the now infamous dinner table scene in the "Fishes" episode, Edebiri whispered "purple" to Curtis and walked away. "What purple meant was 'wound,'" Curtis says, "that color that a wound turns. That was a very intimate moment between she and I—I believe that's the take they used in the show. It was incredible."

In Curtis, Edebiri saw the type of actor she'd like to become, a veteran still eager to do the work. "They're not settled and they're not bored," she says. "That makes me feel very heartened because I hope that when I am at that stage of my life, if I'm so lucky to have that, that I still am searching and questioning and excited."

The titular character in *Ella McCay* is a politician preparing to become governor. When I ask Edebiri how she feels about the real-life presidential election on the horizon, her response is succinct: "nervous." Outside of voting, she doesn't consider herself to be all that politically engaged, "but I think my standard is pretty high," she says. "I grew up in a family where my parents were always volunteering at polling places and always making calls and stuff. I have memories of doing my homework at call centers for Elizabeth Warren and Obama."

Because she knows activist is such an important label, it's not one she gives herself. "A lot of public figures get in that space, and then they're like, 'Wait, that's not what I do.' So they leave and then people get upset at them. [Or] they're saying things but they're actually not [as] informed as they thought they were. It's a tricky thing."

"I have a lot of taste," she says of her hobbies, which include **SCRAPBOOKING,** and **3D SUSHI PUZZLES.** "I don't know if I have **GOOD TASTE OR BAD TASTE,** but I have a lot."

THE EDEBIRI I meet for dinner and over Zoom—with whom I've since exchanged texts about everything from nonalcoholic aperitifs to the hilarity of the '80s dating show *Love Connection*—is simply "a matured version of who she was as a child," her best friend since third grade Michelle Kim Nguyen tells me. "Ayo has always been this very quirky, vibrant, energetic, interesting person. We grew up looking at celebrities and you almost feel like they're of another world. Walking down the street with Ayo and hearing someone scream 'Yes, Chef' is so funny. That she's the same person she's always been makes it even weirder."

As much as Edebiri is savoring this time in her life and the current "go, go, go, go, go" pace of her career, the thought of having more time to scrapbook, put together 3D sushi puzzles, and watch murder mysteries sounds nice. "I have a lot of taste," she says of her hobbies and interests. "I don't know if I have good taste or bad taste, but I have a lot." Slowing down "is not a negative thing to me. When I think of people whose careers I admire, there are ebbs and flows."

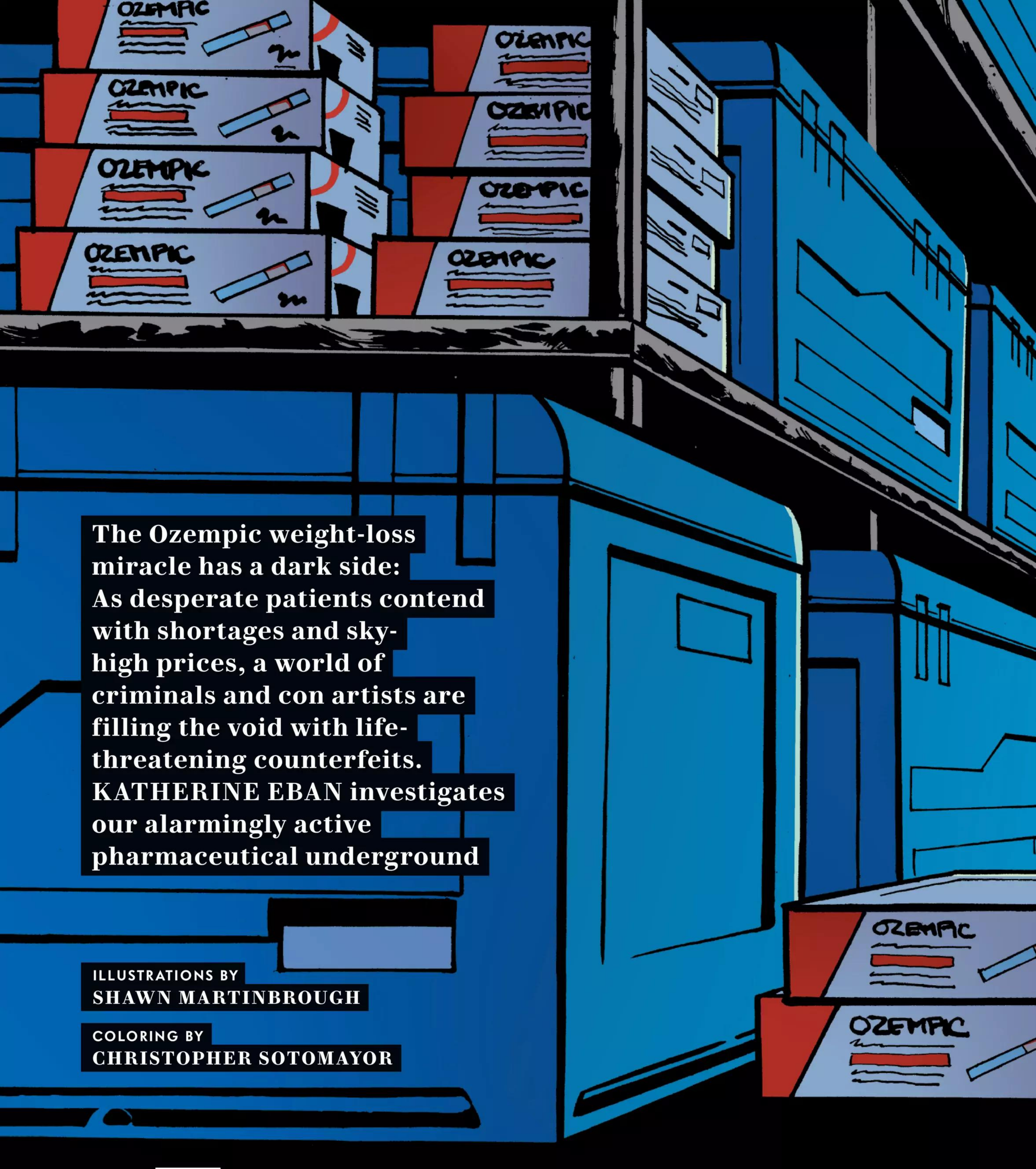
In the thick of the awards shows and photo shoots and interviews that Edebiri was doing last year, when she was feeling overwhelmed, she had a conversation with a fellow actor. She keeps his name a secret but not his advice: "He was like, 'Just remember why you're doing this; remember the actual reason why you're doing this, and it'll be fine.'"

"Why are you doing all of this?" I ask.

"Because I love it." ■

HAIR, LACY REDWAY; MAKEUP, MARCELO GUTIERREZ; MANICURE, MARIA SALANDRA; TAILOR, MARIA DEL GRECO; SET DESIGN, JULIA WAGNER. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY ICE STUDIOS. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

Clothing by **Loewe;** earrings by **Cartier.** Throughout: hair products by **SheaMoisture;** makeup products by **MAC;** nail enamel by **Dior Vernis.**



The Ozempic weight-loss miracle has a dark side: As desperate patients contend with shortages and sky-high prices, a world of criminals and con artists are filling the void with life-threatening counterfeits. KATHERINE EBAN investigates our alarmingly active pharmaceutical underground

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
SHAWN MARTINBROUGH

COLORING BY
CHRISTOPHER SOTOMAYOR

Shots *in*

the Dark

IN EARLY DECEMBER, James Pinckney II, MD, stood in a cold warehouse in Elmira, New York, surveying what looked like the deal of the century.

Pallets of blue coolers stretched before him, each packed with boxes bearing the logo of Danish drugmaker Novo Nordisk: an Egyptian Apis bull, representing strength and fertility, balancing the sun between its horns.

Until recently, Novo Nordisk was a sleepy century-old insulin manufacturer. But in the past two years, its diabetes treatment Ozempic has swept the world. After a clinical trial confirmed that the drug, first approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2017, produces miraculous weight loss, influencers from Elon Musk to Oprah helped popularize it. The drug has brought new hope to those struggling with obesity and made Novo Nordisk Europe's most valuable company even as it tore open a Pandora's box of human vanity. The frenzy surrounding it has sparked global shortages.

Pinckney, an ebullient family medicine doctor married to a former *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model, is the founder and CEO of Diamond Health, a concierge medical practice in Dallas. His quest for affordable Ozempic had brought him to the warehouse of F.M. Howell & Company, a mid-size pharmaceutical distributor founded in 1883. Snapping photos, Pinckney closely examined the shrink-wrapped boxes of Ozempic, each containing a single four-dose pen of injectable semaglutide, the peptide developed by Novo Nordisk that increases the body's insulin production, slows digestion, and decreases appetite.

Pinckney left favorably impressed with the potential windfall. Here was a reputable wholesaler with thousands of Ozempic pens at a relatively affordable price.

To be safe, Pinckney decided to ask for help vetting the merchandise. He reached out to Dennis Moore, a former California drug investigator who runs a company called Hudson Scientific that facilitates the manufacture and distribution of drugs and medical devices. Moore had been trying and failing for more than a year to become an authorized Novo Nordisk distributor. He'd also had his eye on the Ozempic for sale at F.M. Howell.

Following Moore's detailed instructions, Pinckney sent him documentation and photos, then shipped several samples of the Ozempic to a reference laboratory in Minnesota. Upon initial inspection, the product looked good. It bore an authentic lot number, NAR0074, and came with a detailed inventory trail. On December 18, the Minnesota lab came back with its results: The pen contained the right peptide, semaglutide, for which Novo Nordisk holds the exclusive patent. But there was an oddity: The pens contained more than the specified dose of 1 milligram per injection.

Looking closer, Moore and his quality director, Angela Powell, noticed other irregularities: The injection needles looked slightly different. And a small label on each pen was almost imperceptibly askew.

Powell realized something was gravely wrong when she scrutinized the boxes in the photos. Each box should have been marked with a unique serial number, but instead they all had the same one: 430834149057. Moore picked up the phone and called Novo Nordisk.

Three days later, on December 21, the FDA blasted out an alert. Counterfeit Ozempic had been detected in the legitimate drug supply, the agency warned, and no one should sell, distribute, or use any Ozempic pens labeled with lot number NAR0074 and serial number 430834149057.

This looked like a fast response by FDA standards, but it wasn't fast enough. Thousands of counterfeit Ozempic pens had arrived at F.M. Howell's warehouse in the fall of 2023. Since then, some had been sold. Where had those doses gone?

And, just as pressing: Where had they come from?

Pinckney declined to comment for this article, citing the ongoing FDA investigation. In a phone call, Katherine Roehlke, the CEO of F.M. Howell, said, "We are bound by confidentiality agreements with our customers.... Your facts are incorrect," then hung up. An FDA spokesperson said the agency "cannot comment further on an ongoing investigation."

Under US law, drugs are supposed to travel seamlessly from a manufacturer's loading dock to a distributor's pristine warehouse to a pharmacy shelf through a protected chain of companies that follow strict requirements for handling medications and documenting sales.

But while the American drug supply is dominated by three large distributors, it's also teeming with small-time middlemen with state licenses who buy and sell drugs like any other commodity. Sometimes, as they scour the marketplace for bargains, they may buy what are known as "diverted" drugs, which have been siphoned out of authorized sales channels. Some have been stolen, illegally resold by patients, or improperly hawked out of a pharmacy's back door. The drugs may well be authentic, but they might also be expired, improperly stored, or contaminated. Under FDA rules, diverted drugs are considered adulterated and not fit for human consumption, because their safety and quality cannot be guaranteed.

Then there are outright counterfeits, drugs that have been criminally altered in some way: diluted, replaced with cheaper ingredients, or relabeled, for example.

In America's pharmaceutical gray market, where the origin of drugs can be murky, counterfeiters may take advantage of a shortage by offering desperate pharmacies and wholesalers a bargain that's too good to refuse, especially when it comes with a credible cover story. "Wherever you have illegal diversion, you're going to have counterfeits," says C. Todd Ratcliffe, president and CEO of the Pharmaceutical Security Institute, a nonprofit where pharma security directors pool intelligence on emerging threats.

The more popular or costly the drug, the bigger the gray market, the more middlemen clamoring for it, and the more criminal opportunity. To figure out where lot NAR0074 counterfeits originated required solving a complex puzzle with pieces potentially strewn all over the globe. The FDA was confronting a vast

matrix of possible suspects, including organized crime rings with ties to the governments of foreign nations. All have been learning as they go how to breach America's defenses in order to sell their counterfeit medicine in the most expensive, and lucrative, market in the world.

OZEMPIC BELONGS TO a class of drugs known as GLP-1 agonists, which were originally developed to control diabetes. The first such drug to be approved by the FDA was developed in the 1990s after a team of Veterans Affairs researchers discovered that Gila monster venom contains a hormone that regulates blood sugar. The drug they helped create, exenatide, a precursor to Ozempic, has been used by millions of diabetes patients over the past two decades.

But the weight-loss potential of these drugs took center stage only in the past three years, after a clinical trial of Ozempic confirmed a surprise benefit: Those taking it could lose as much as 15 percent of their body weight. Social media and deft marketing by Novo Nordisk did the rest. The new generation of GLP-1 agonists have become household names, chief among them Novo Nordisk's Ozempic and Wegovy, and Eli Lilly's Mounjaro and Zepbound. (While Ozempic and Mounjaro are approved to treat diabetes, in practice doctors prescribe all four drugs to patients looking to lose weight.)

And with everyone from obesity patients to never-too-rich-or-thin celebrities demanding the drugs, they have become a hot commodity among transnational crime groups, homegrown counterfeiters, rogue compounders, shady middlemen, unscrupulous doctors, and medi-spas of dubious legality.

"Counterfeiters are like any other businessman," says Geoffrey Potter, a US brand-protection attorney. "They wake up every day thinking, How do I expand my business?" For counterfeiters, the conditions for commercial growth are perfect: soaring prices, worldwide shortages, desperate patients, and ever-climbing obesity rates.

Back in its pre-semaglutide days, Novo Nordisk enjoyed a relatively serene existence. Headquartered in Bagsvaerd, Denmark, it has spent years quietly researching how to make insulin that lasts longer in the body. The Novo Nordisk Foundation, which last year awarded $1.3 billion in philanthropic grants and investments, helps fund climate change solutions and other causes. Yes, the company had run-ins with bad guys, like the crew that hijacked one of its insulin trucks in North Carolina in 2009. And it, too, occasionally was accused of being the bad guy: In 2017, the Justice Department alleged in a civil lawsuit that Novo Nordisk failed to warn consumers of the risks of a rare cancer from one of its diabetes medicines, Victoza. The company settled for $58.7 million without acknowledging wrongdoing.

But for the most part, the company was *not* on a war footing. It didn't even have a global product security director until recently. Now, with a veritable *Star Wars* canteen of international criminals counterfeiting its products, Novo Nordisk has had to get tough fast. In September 2022, it hired its first director of global product security, Anne Devaud, a former French customs superintendent who had been in charge of investigations at Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris. "My first mandate was to confirm to the management, do we have an issue with counterfeits?" Devaud tells *Vanity Fair*. "A few months after, I was able to say yes, we have an issue."

The scale and scope of those counterfeits is daunting. "The link with organized crime is increasing," Devaud explains. "We can see now that the modus operandi of the counterfeiters [is] more and more sophisticated.... They are well organized. They have the channel to distribute."

Novo Nordisk made available for the first time several of its top security and risk management officials to discuss the global proliferation of counterfeit Ozempic, but they declined to discuss any ongoing investigations. Through extensive reporting and interviews with pharmacists, doctors, security experts, law enforcement officials, private investigators, and attorneys, *VF* obtained details of specific counterfeiting incidents around the world.

Some counterfeiting schemes are industrial-scale efforts to replicate semaglutide, with uneven success. Others are cruder and even more dangerous switcheroos. Many of the patients whose adverse effects have been reported to the FDA have injected insulin that was relabeled to look like Ozempic. Diabetics use insulin to lower their blood sugar. For nondiabetics, accidentally injecting insulin can be "worse than life-threatening," says Michael Wahl, MD, medical director of the Illinois Poison Center. "You can get irreversible brain damage if your glucose is too low for too long."

The list of risks goes on: mystery impurities, improper storage conditions, dirty needles. According to FDA records obtained by *VF*, patients around the world have suffered horrifying consequences, including comas and seizures. One death has been linked to a suspected instance of counterfeit Wegovy. Fake versions of Ozempic have landed in multiple countries, from Lebanon and Serbia to Belgium and the United Kingdom. Between July 2022 and January 2024, the FDA fielded 12 reports of US patients harmed by counterfeit Ozempic, with symptoms ranging from loss of consciousness to swelling of the throat and face. There have also been reports of nine patients who suffered adverse events related to lot NAR0074, though it's unclear if they used pens from the real lot or the counterfeit batch.

Meanwhile, the law enforcement agencies tasked with countering this global threat face a host of intractable obstacles. A key law in the US to better monitor the supply chain is still only partly implemented after more than a decade on the books. International laws range from weak to nonexistent. Corrupt governments look the other way at counterfeiting rings, if they aren't participants themselves. "The good ideas are too late, they don't keep pace with [evolving] technology, and there's a fractured system of regulatory enforcement," says Libby Baney, a lawyer specializing in online drug safety and distribution. "All these layers of complexity create criminal opportunity."

In the US, this dysfunction was visible back in the early 2000s, when I spent three

On December 21, the FDA blasted out an alert: Counterfeit Ozempic had been detected in the legitimate drug supply.

Several days later, two more patients were admitted to the ICU. They had injected Ozempic pens they'd gotten at a Botox party after a day of drinking.

years in South Florida shadowing pharmacists and cops on the trail of domestic counterfeiters. The book I wrote, *Dangerous Doses,* prompted domestic reforms, including a pledge by the nation's largest pharmaceutical wholesalers to stop buying from a poorly regulated gray market of middlemen, some of whom were convicted narcotics traffickers.

Since that time, however, the counterfeiters have gotten smarter, better, and, most importantly, bigger. Where once they operated out of shady neighborhoods, now they're woven into the infrastructure of entire countries. Russian organized crime has moved into the Canadian online pharmacy space. China's government is openly subsidizing companies that illegally buy and sell the ingredients for synthetic fentanyl. And counterfeit versions of cancer drugs including Keytruda and Avastin have been traced to Turkey. The relative lack of enforcement in that country is "a huge issue and a huge threat," says Tara Steketee, the former director of product integrity at Merck, which manufactures Keytruda.

The pallets of counterfeit Ozempic pens in F.M. Howell's warehouse looked good to the untrained eye and had come with a seemingly legitimate sales history. But the boxes had emerged from a pharmaceutical underworld that was primed for the emergence of a miracle drug. A global network of sophisticated counterfeiters, dodgy middlemen, and rank opportunists had each played their part. By now, the culprits—and the counterfeits—could be anywhere.

IN THE FALL of 2023, a young woman in Salzburg, Austria, visited a plastic surgeon who was selling Ozempic pens illegally. Not diabetic and only slightly overweight, she made four visits to buy the pens. Each time, the surgeon's price ticked upward, as supplies throughout Europe grew scarce.

The drug appeared to be working. But when the woman injected the fourth pen, she suffered convulsions and her blood sugar plunged. The counterfeit pen contained insulin, not semaglutide, and the hypoglycemic attack it caused could have been fatal had the woman's boyfriend not rushed her to the hospital. Two days later, another of the plastic surgeon's patients suffered a similar life-threatening reaction.

In a report to the FDA, Novo Nordisk described how another Austrian patient who took counterfeit Ozempic had a "seizure for circa 7 minutes, was foaming at the mouth, their eyes were open and was staring straight ahead, the patient was hyperventilating."

European investigators tracing the origin of the counterfeit pens sold by the plastic surgeon followed the chain of custody through a web of distributors in Austria, Germany, and the UK and back to an all-too-familiar home base: Turkey. Specifically, an exporter in Ankara named AUB Healthcare was identified as being a conduit for the counterfeits.

Reached by phone, Hatice Bilir, a foreign trade specialist at the company and the wife of the owner, denied selling counterfeit Ozempic. "Why are we blamed for something we haven't done?" she asked. "We have nothing to do with these baseless claims." She said AUB had provided exonerating information to the Turkish health ministry but did not share it with *VF.* (Officials from Turkey's health ministry did not respond to repeated calls or detailed questions.)

Lately, drug investigators in both the public and private sectors have found themselves increasingly preoccupied with Turkey. "Everything is linking back there right now," says Kris Buckner, a Los Angeles private investigator who works with a number of international drug companies. "Turkey is rampant with diverted product, but recently we've seen a huge spike in counterfeit lifesaving drugs."

Investigators at the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center (IPR), a task force that steers the US government's anti-counterfeiting efforts from within the Department of Homeland Security, say Turkey is a top priority this year. It's one of five countries, they say, including China, Mexico, the UK, and India, from which the highest volume of counterfeited, diverted, and adulterated pharmaceuticals originate. "We're going to work with our international law enforcement partners and try to make the biggest impact we can," says IPR Center director James Mancuso.

Because Turkey subsidizes its pharmaceuticals and has some of the lowest-priced drugs in Europe, "criminals would come in, buy up all the subsidized pharmaceuticals, and then resell them" in other countries, says Nicole Johnson, a special agent and national program manager at the IPR Center. Before long, criminals were slipping sophisticated fakes into this stream of diverted drugs.

Last fall, the IPR Center partnered with Interpol and the Turkish National Police as part of a sweeping investigation called Operation Pangea, first launched in 2008. In October, there was a promising development when Turkish police seized thousands of counterfeit drugs from warehouses in southeast Turkey. But in the months since then, Buckner says, Turkey has failed to produce an inventory of the products seized, and there's no indication that the criminal activity has been disrupted or that counterfeiters have been identified or charged.

A lawyer in Istanbul, Ezgi Baklacı Gülkokar, who represents international pharmaceutical companies, says, "In counterfeiting, especially the expensive drugs, it's very hard to find the actual man behind it, and they usually use middlemen. At the end, the middleman gets the punishment." Such cases, she says, are "very dangerous to investigate."

An independent Turkish journalist, Murat Ağırel, has reported extensively on corruption within Turkey's nationalized health care system, where he found evidence of government officials routing contracts to shady pharmaceutical suppliers. In 2018, the government purchased a cancer medicine consisting of acetaminophen. The fake medicine was also exported to countries including

Iran, according to an indictment by an Istanbul prosecutor.

"The people involved in counterfeiting have political connections, and they are part of a vicious circle of bribery," says Ağırel. "That is how they could fulfill the requirements to obtain" the government bids. To rein in Ağırel's reporting, a Turkish court placed him under a type of restraining order typically used on domestic violence abusers.

In 2011, the Council of Europe established the Medicrime Convention, the only international legal instrument that fights counterfeit medical products. As one of the council's 46 member states, Turkey ratified the convention in 2017, but it sends no representatives to meetings and has not appointed a formal contact person.

The scale of counterfeiting activities inside Turkey raises questions about the government's complicity, says Buckner: "I don't really think anything happens in countries at this level unless there's some kind of [government] involvement. They can stop any problem they want to stop, if there's a will."

BACK AT HUDSON Scientific this past December, Angela Powell was still trying to determine where the thousands of boxes of discounted Ozempic in lot NAR0074 had come from.

The drugs had been shipped last fall to F.M. Howell's warehouse, according to shipping and inventory records with differing dates. A company called Chadwick Pharmaceuticals, in Madison, Mississippi, was listed in those records as both a purchaser and a consignee. Chadwick wasn't a major company, nor was it some fly-by-night operation. Founded in 2015, it was licensed to distribute medicine in 22 states.

On November 30, Powell sent Chadwick an eight-page supplier questionnaire. It posed such important questions as: To whom does your company's quality control manager report? Have any regulatory agencies inspected your facility in the last five years? Is a testing plan in place for all incoming products?

By law, Hudson Scientific had an obligation to ask questions, and Chadwick was supposed to respond promptly. As a drug supplier, says Powell, "they know they are required" to answer these questions. But there was no response.

On December 12, Powell resent the questionnaire to Chadwick's president, Bobby J. King Jr. Again, nothing.

Under a federal law called the Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA), passed in 2013, everyone in the supply chain, from manufacturers and suppliers to pharmacists, is bound to vet their suppliers and customers. This reform was supposed to address the problem of dubious middlemen, who were selling stolen and sometimes counterfeit medicine out of car trunks, their own laundry rooms, and strip club parking lots. This expansive gray market had long obscured the origin of drugs, enabling counterfeits of such medication as Epogen and Lipitor to reach American consumers.

More than a decade later, however, the DSCSA is not yet fully in effect. One of its key provisions, for a system of easily accessible digital custody records, has been repeatedly postponed. It is now scheduled to be fully implemented this November.





For now, Powell was working off a paper trail. And the more she studied it, the less sense it made. According to one record, Chadwick had purchased the Ozempic in late September and had it shipped to 100 East Miller Street in Elmira, New York. But that was the address of F.M. Howell's warehouse. Strangely, F.M. Howell's *name* did not appear on the transaction history, even though its address did. (Chadwick's president did not respond to detailed questions seeking comment.)

Vanity Fair obtained a separate shipping document that pointed to another party unnamed in the official transaction history. Listed as a joint "consignee" with Chadwick was a Manhattan company called Assure Global LLC, which *VF* traced to a businessman named Roman Vintfeld, who'd previously had run-ins with state prosecutors in Florida and New Jersey.

In 2011, the attorney general of New Jersey accused one of Vintfeld's companies, Industry Model and Talent Studios LLC, of committing fraud. A complaint accused Vintfeld of posing as a children's talent scout at shopping malls and amusement parks and charging parents exorbitant fees for photo shoots and marketing campaigns that could lead to modeling contracts. The alleged swindle brought in more than 200 complaints. Vintfeld repeated the scheme in Florida, according to state charges. His companies settled both cases, and he went on to file for bankruptcy.

Vintfeld founded Assure Global in 2014. During the pandemic, the Defense Logistics Agency awarded the firm a $750,000 contract to provide hand sanitizer.

Reached by phone and asked why his company's name appeared on a shipping document for a trove of counterfeit Ozempic, Vintfeld said, "That's news to me." Then he hung up.

The paperwork accompanying the phony lot NAR0074 was suspiciously opaque, with hidden names, intertwined corporate entities, and one company listed at the address of another. There are even conflicting records of how many boxes were delivered: One document lists 10,000 units and another 20,000. And that was all once the drug had infiltrated the US supply. What had happened before that? How had outright counterfeits gotten into our market at all?

FOUNDED IN 2005, the Obesity Action Coalition is a nonprofit that aims to fight bias and improve access to treatment. Every year it holds a convention with lectures and working groups, attended by the nation's top obesity doctors as well as patients.

But with the stratospheric popularity of GLP-1 drugs, even the educational convention has become a hunting ground for gray market profiteers.

At last September's event, the usual crowd of doctors and patients were joined by a curious character: Syd Karabel, a disheveled pharmacy rep in his late 70s who said he represented a Canadian company called UbaCare. Karabel had

not preregistered for the conference, but he made his presence known almost immediately.

Approaching doctors at the conference, he held up a crumpled piece of notebook paper with his contact information and his product list. The sales pitch was simple: UbaCare could provide automated refills for "Ozempic, Saxenda, Mounjaro, etc." at roughly one third of the going US price. He was "stalker-ish," going so far as to ask patients at the conference where they got their meds, according to one attendee, Katherine Saunders, MD. He later peppered Saunders's office with follow-up calls. His goal: to get doctors at the conference to steer prescriptions to him. "It was sketchy. Everyone was talking about it."

The Obesity Action Coalition finally told Karabel to "knock it off," says Joseph Nadglowski, the organization's president and CEO. "I don't know anyone who took him up on his offer, but he was very aggressive." A month later, Karabel resumed his antics at an Obesity Week conference in Dallas.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Syd Karabel is not a medical doctor. Nor is he Syd—not with a *y* anyway. A search for "Sid Karabel" turns up a Florida resident with a trail of shuttered businesses to his name and a history of bankruptcy proceedings.

Reached by phone, Karabel declined to comment. Over email, UbaCare's vice-president and director of operations, Chad A. Robertson, said, "Dr. Karabel is not a representative of UbaCare past or present.... Our relationship with Dr. Karabel is that of a colleague that we collaborated with." He added that UbaCare "is neither the buyer, dispensary, or shipper of record for any GLPs" to the US.

The supply chain is now overflowing with wannabe Ozempic distributors and online pharmacies looking to turn a profit by purchasing cut-rate weight-loss meds on the gray market and selling them to price-conscious patients. Last year, a cybersecurity firm took down more than 250 websites selling fake versions of GLP-1 drugs, Reuters recently reported. By February 2024, illegal pharmacies in the US were filling more than 734,000 GLP-1 prescriptions per month, according to data compiled by Translucent DataLab and the IQVIA Institute for Human Data Science.

Online meds sold illegally are frequently diverted if not counterfeit. The middlemen behind these operations prey on the desperation of patients suffering from obesity, who face a crippling shortage of doctors to treat them and a miraculous medication that is priced beyond reach.

A staggering 42 percent of American adults—more than 100 million people—are considered to have obesity. That number is projected to rise to 50 percent by 2030, the GLP-1 drugs notwithstanding. By contrast, there are only 146 doctors in America who are fellowship-trained in obesity medicine. A larger number, 7,747, are board-certified obesity specialists, but the quality of their training ranges widely. Only 30 academic medical centers have obesity treatment training programs.

Like their patients, these doctors must contend with the misperception that obesity results from insufficient willpower. It's a "really complex disease, it's chronic," says Saunders. "Once somebody has obesity, they have [it] for life." Though there have been great strides in recent years toward ending fat shaming and promoting body positivity, patients suffering from obesity still find themselves in a landscape of depleted medical services.

Every obesity specialist in the country has a waiting list of six to nine months, says Saunders, who was the first clinical fellow to graduate from Weill Cornell Medicine's Comprehensive Weight Control Center with a degree in obesity medicine. She cofounded Intellihealth, a company that offers tools and clinical support to health care providers that treat obesity. Among its clients is the state of Connecticut.

The GLP-1 drugs, which Intellihealth's staff members spend hours each day attempting to track down, "need to be used strategically, as part of a specialized plan," says Saunders. "There is so much inappropriate prescribing, too little education and support. The medication needs to be part of a huge infrastructure."

But that infrastructure doesn't exist, says Caroline Apovian, MD, a pioneer in the field of obesity medicine, in part because the condition is "so stigmatized." She adds: "Key opinion leaders in oncology, cardiac medicine, they can get donors" to help fund research. "I have Saudi princes and billionaires coming to see me" for treatment, and yet "I have trouble getting donations."

Meanwhile, the cost of the GLP-1 drugs—roughly $12,000 a year without insurance—places them beyond the reach of most patients who need them. Apovian's practice, the Center for Weight Management and Wellness at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, saw 12,000 patients last year and has a yearlong waiting list. "We're all exhausted," she says. "We can't get medications. Either they're in shortage or insurance won't cover them, because if they covered them, they'd go bankrupt."

In April, North Carolina's state health plan discontinued coverage of GLP-1 drugs for its teachers and other employees. "It's going to create a lot of desperate people," says Jamy Ard, MD, codirector of the Wake Forest Baptist Health Weight Management Center in North Carolina.

It's become common for patients to tell the doctors at Ard's practice that they'd like to continue treatment at his center but use discounted medications they've sourced themselves. Invariably, his answer is no. It's "really untenable," he says, to care for patients taking mystery medicines. "There's no chain of custody, no one has demonstrated it's pure."

But that "fear of missing out, that sense of urgency," says Ard, has turned patients into freelancers, each on the hunt for some special deal, some secret source, so they can reap semaglutide's game-changing benefits.

LAST AUGUST, Novo Nordisk's president and CEO, Lars Fruergaard Jørgensen, arrived in Beijing for a charm offensive. He met with the deputy director of China's State Food and Drug Administration to discuss drug research and "intellectual property protection," according to a government press release.

The visit dovetailed with the arrival of Denmark's minister of foreign affairs, who CONTINUED ON PAGE 100

"We can't get medications. Either they're in shortage or insurance won't cover them, because if they covered them, they'd go bankrupt."

Between *Anyone but You* and the upcoming *Twisters*,

GLEN POWELL

has seen all kinds of action on the way to becoming one of Hollywood's hottest young stars

By **BRITT HENNEMUTH**

Photographs by
MATTHEW BROOKES

Styled by
SEPPE TIRABASSI

THE HIT MAN



GROOMING, PETER GRAY; TAILOR, GOHAR AVAGYAN. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY COWBOYS PRODUCTION. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS.

WHEN HE WAS 19, Glen Powell made a bad decision straight out of an ’80s teen comedy: He threw a party in somebody else’s house in Beverly Hills without asking permission. Denzel Washington had recently cast him as Harvard Debater Number One in *The Great Debaters* and told him he had promise, so Powell had left the University of Texas at Austin and moved into a Los Angeles pool house belonging to a college friend’s mom. Powell was mannying for cash and self-taping auditions. Occasionally he’d land a guest spot on a *CSI* or *Rizzoli & Isles* thanks to the support of Washington’s late agent, Ed Limato, who used to say Powell was a cross between William Hurt and Richard Gere. Otherwise, Powell didn’t have much going for him—except access to a house in 90210. “I came from that college-party mentality where there are no boundaries,” he says. “Nobody gives a fuck about you in Hollywood if you can’t offer them something. I made a mistake and offered the house.”

You’ve seen enough movies to know what happened next. Seventy-five uninvited strangers flooded the party, the pool, and the main house. Then his friend’s younger sister came home. She evicted Powell on the spot, adding, in her fury, that he’d never make it in Hollywood. “She laid into me that night and rightfully

LONE STAR
Glen Powell, photographed at a ranch in Lancaster, California, in March.

Coat by **Alexander McQueen;** tank top by **Greg Lauren;** jeans by **Levi's;** hat by **Kemo Sabe;** watch by **Omega.**

Previous spread: T-shirt by **Dolce & Gabbana;** jeans by **Phipps International;** bracelets by **David Yurman** (bottom) and **Peyote Bird.**

“IT’S ENTERTAINMENT. I’M OKAY NOW WITH MY PERSONAL LIFE BEING PART OF THE ENTERTAINMENT.”

so,” Powell says. “But I’ve probably been told, ‘You’ll never make it in this town’ more than any individual alive. The odds are so slim that people hand that quote out like candy.” Powell had to relocate out by the airport in hot, gusty Van Nuys. “I was like, ‘You know what? This is where you deserve to be, you piece of shit.’ It was like the worst hangover ever. But every major turning point in my time out here has always come from a hit in the face.”

Fifteen years later, Powell is reportedly the second most bankable young actor in the business, thanks to *Top Gun: Maverick* and the romantic comedy *Anyone but You,* with Sydney Sweeney, which TikTok turned into a $219 million global smash. This puts him behind only Timothée Chalamet. While Chalamet zigs with bilingual allure and boyish androgyny, Powell zags with all-American brawn, leavening it with goofball energy and southern charisma. This month, he nails a sly, chameleonic turn in Richard Linklater’s action comedy *Hit Man* on Netflix. And in July, he will recklessly court danger in Universal’s disaster movie *Twisters.* Powell recently had dinner with executives from the major theater chains. Like his flight instructor Tom Cruise, he’s got an old-fashioned conviction about putting bodies in seats, and the chains need him as much as he needs them.

EARLY ONE SUNDAY, Powell picks me up at home in a “big ol’ honkin’ truck” that a studio hooked him up with while he’s in LA. At the height of his career, Powell has actually moved back to Austin to be with family and friends. His parents are on the speakerphone when I get in the truck. They tell me they’re “just *over the moon*” that their son is based in Texas again, even if he’s invariably on some far-flung set anyway.

We stop by a flea market to look for furniture for his new place. Powell came here for years, but life is different lately: Even in a ball cap and blue jeans, everyone recognizes him. Before the move back to Austin, an Uber driver had turned into a stalker, a woman who’d never looked his way was now aggressively interested, and friends he’d known forever suddenly had scripts they needed him to read. “I literally felt like a commodity for the first time,” Powell says. “I started to think, This may be a problem.”

Powell got his first taste of attention overload while shooting *Anyone but You* in Australia, when paparazzi photos of him and Sweeney on the set were taken out of context to stoke rumors of an affair. It didn’t help that Powell had just broken up with his long-term girlfriend. Sweeney’s fiancé was a producer on the film—and present for the entire shoot—but the tabloids and social media ran with the story they wanted to hear. Powell tries to make sense of it all, even as he is stopped, almost comically often, by fans for selfies. “I went straight from Australia to Oklahoma”—to film *Twisters*—“and all that social media attention started happening as soon as I landed,” he says. “When you’re in Oklahoma, all that stuff feels louder because you’re away from your people. All you’re left with is your thoughts.”

“Excuse me,” says a young woman. “Can I get a picture?”

Powell happily agrees, and when she’s moved on, he continues: “At the end of the day, I don’t give a fuck anymore. At the time, I did give a fuck. I gave a lot of fucks. And it felt shitty and personal. I don’t think people realize that I am very sensitive because I am a guy that jokes about stuff. The gamification of this gig is that you basically have to—”

“Mr. Powell,” says a teenager in a golf shirt.

“Yeah?”

“Oh my gosh. You’re in *Maverick,* right?

“Yeah.”

“Can I have a selfie?”

“Yeah, of course. Nice meeting you, man.”

The boy’s mom tells Powell that they’re in LA for college tours.

“Where are you touring?” Powell asks.

“We’re touring USC tomorrow, and UCLA,” the boy says.

“Oh, that’s awesome, man,” Powell says. “Well, good luck at college. You’ve chosen the right state for it.” Then, to me, without skipping a beat: “It’s almost like creating a wrestler alter ego. It’s like you’re Bruce Wayne and Batman. Nobody has the full picture, so you have to be okay with them not having a full picture. It’s entertainment. I’m okay now with my personal life being part of the entertainment.”

When *Anyone but You* came out this past Christmas, it initially bombed. But over the holidays, the social media buzz ramped up. Videos of fans singing Natasha Bedingfield’s “Unwritten” (the movie’s theme song) as they left theaters became a trend. Plus, the affair rumors resurfaced. “So we leaned in,” Powell says. In March, he even popped up on *SNL* when Sweeney was hosting to lampoon the speculation. “We leaned into the chemistry, we leaned into the fun, we leaned into all of it—and the movie benefited. The fun part with Syd was figuring out what’s going to be noisy and sticky. People talk about TikTok as a thing that is cannibalizing the theaters, and what we saw is that they feed into each other: It becomes more eventized and more fun. Glen, the person, would not have been comfortable with that a year and a half ago. Now I can put myself in a different place and be a character.” Audiences have loudly requested an *Anyone but You* sequel, and ideas are being batted around.

Suit by **Ralph Lauren Purple Label;** sunglasses by **Jacques Marie Mage;** belt by **Brunello Cucinelli;** necklace by **David Yurman.**



AS WE NAVIGATE the flea market, Powell tells me not to let him near anyone selling candles. He's a sucker for them, particularly high-concept ones like Goop's iconic This Smells Like My Vagina and the *Saltburn* keepsake known as Jacob Elordi's Bathwater.

So we steer clear of candles. Instead, Powell buys some David Sedaris books to read on set, and we head off to brunch. The restaurant is filled with women in bandage dresses and high heels having bachelorette parties and baby showers. Soon iPhones start coyly popping up as people try to capture a movie star in the wild. This is why dating in the era of Deuxmoi is taxing. The week before we met, Powell left a comedy show and was walking next to someone he'd never even heard of. The internet immediately insisted they were dating. "People are creating constellations," he says. "You look at the stars and you draw lines and create a picture. In the past I would've been like, 'That's not the right constellation. That's not Orion's Belt!' And now you're sort of like, 'Oh, that's fine. Let them connect the dots however they want.'"

Professionally, Powell's life is at high tide. He's heading to Cape Town to star in a revenge thriller called *Huntington* for A24, then there's Edgar Wright's remake of *The Running Man* for Paramount. Powell will presumably be in the mix for *Top Gun 3,* which is reportedly in the works, and is set to do a sports comedy series for Hulu in which he will play Chad Powers, an undercover superstar quarterback that Eli Manning created when he tried out for Penn State in a wig and prosthetics. With all these projects, I ask Powell how he finds time for himself—or for a relationship that *isn't* a tabloid creation. "I don't want to be that guy that wakes up 50 years old and didn't let anybody along for the ride," he says. "I don't think it'll ever be me because I look at my parents—and I want kids. I really want that. So I don't think that'll happen, but I understand how it *could* happen."

Powell isn't looking to emulate any particular actor's career, though he's grateful to have Cruise and Matthew McConaughey as mentors, and admires the way Matt Damon has handled family and privacy. Until then, he's happy to be living close to his parents, sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins. In May, he'll be presented with an award from the Texas Film Hall of Fame by his fellow Austinite, Linklater. "I got a plus-45," Powell says. "The squad rolls deep. It's going to be a party." This time at his own house. ■



Clothing by **Tom Ford;** vintage boots by **Lucchese Bootmaker;** hat by **Kemo Sabe;** sunglasses by **Cartier.**

Opposite: vintage clothing, belt, and boots from **Starday Vintage;** sunglasses by **Moscot;** necklace and bracelet (center) by **David Yurman;** bracelets by **Peyote Bird.** Throughout: hair and grooming products by **Oway.**

Magical

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has never been faithfully adapted for the screen—partly because he wouldn't allow it in his lifetime. With a Netflix series now in the works, *VF* tracks the long journey of a masterpiece

By **SILVANA PATERNOSTRO**

Thinking

ONE EVENING IN June 1965, a tired Gabriel García Márquez returned to his hotel after a full day as a screenwriter on the set of a film outside of Mexico City. A young couple was waiting to speak with him.

Gabo, as he's commonly known in Latin America, was then in his late 30s and had published four books, but his masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* was a few years away. He had been mulling over the premise for a long time, and his confidence in the novel was unshakable. He had told his younger brother, Gustavo, that he would one day write a book that would be read more than *Don Quixote,* and after his wedding he told his wife, Mercedes, not to worry about money because at 40, he would publish a novel the entire world would know. He did.

Now, 57 years after its publication, Netflix is making the first true adaptation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for a series due later this year. "The García Márquez fund is very healthy," says Pilar Reyes, editorial director of Penguin Random House in Spain. But back in 1965, Gabo was still an impoverished writer, even if well regarded among Latin American bibliophiles. He was living in Mexico City with his wife and two young sons. He was a chain-smoking transplant from the Colombian Caribbean who earned a living writing copy for an advertising agency (which he hated doing), with the occasional screenwriting gig (which he much preferred). As the two strangers asking to interview him were about to discover, his ability to tell a captivating tale was already in full force in those drudging days.

The couple—a German interpreter named Barbara Dohmann and the Chilean-born writer Luis Harss—had been commissioned by Harper & Row to interview Latin American writers for a book introducing their work to a Stateside audience. Gabo, delighted at the prospect, began to tell them a story. "He literally came to our room, lay on our bed, smoked cigarette after cigarette and just talked," Dohmann, who went on to a successful career as a British barrister, told me last year in London. Later, when she read his next novel, Dohmann realized she had listened to Gabo tell the story of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* firsthand.

A Spanish writer-actor named María Luisa Elío remembered being floored by Gabo's loquaciousness too. She and her husband, Jomí García Ascot, were part of the large group of exiles after the Spanish Civil War and were introduced to Gabo through writers and filmmakers that he hung out with. "We went to lunch and he told me about a priest who levitated, and I believed him," Elío said in 2001, when I asked why the great novelist had dedicated the novel to her and her husband. "After we were left alone and he told me the entire book, I said to him: 'If you write this, you will be writing the Bible.'"

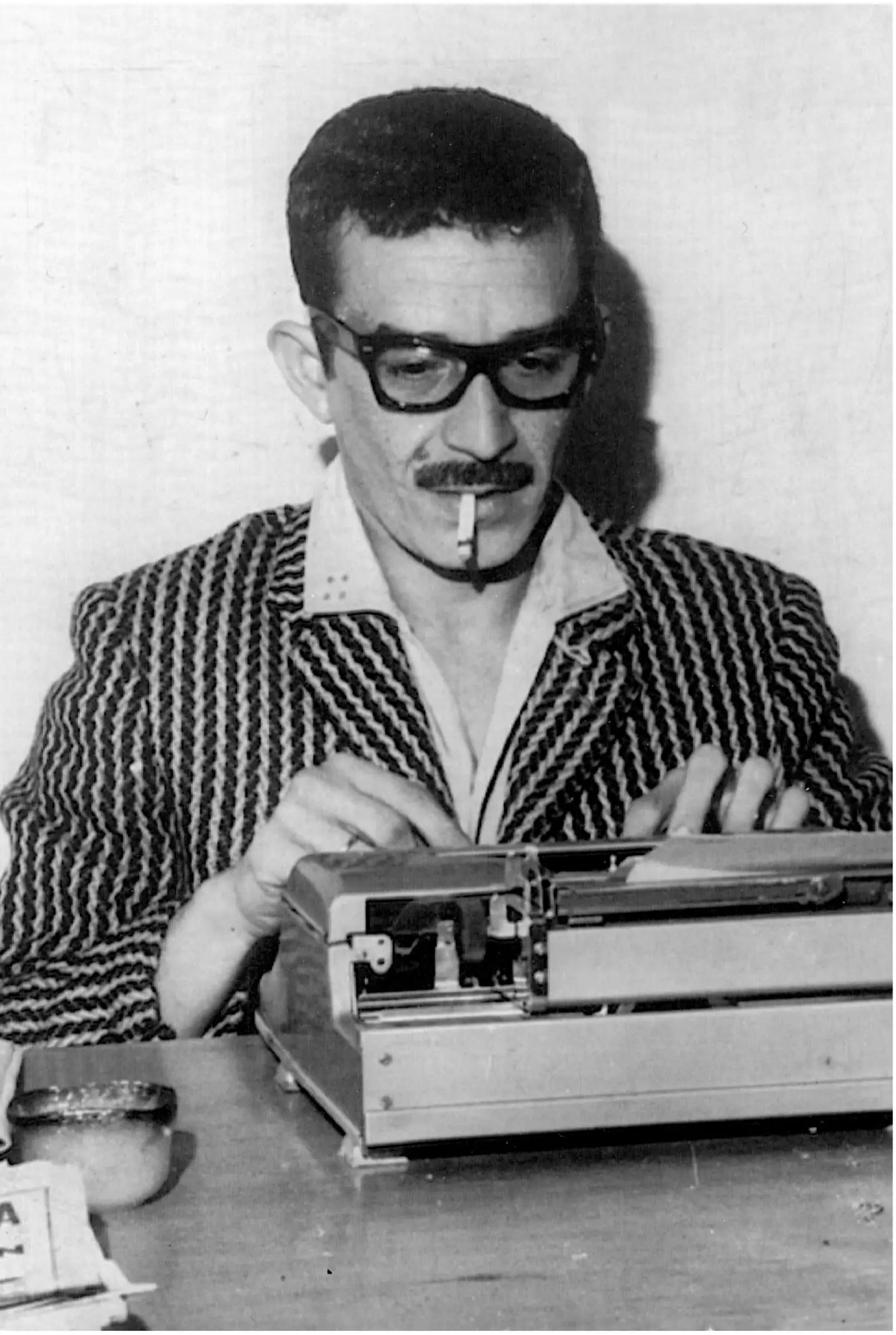
THE VISIONARY
Below: the author in 1980, with his wife, Mercedes, and their sons, Gonzalo and Rodrigo. Two years later, Gabriel García Márquez would win the Nobel Prize in literature. Opposite: the writer at work in 1962 and a first edition of his masterwork. Previous spread: The fictional Macondo was built for the series in the Colombian Andes.



GABO ATTEMPTED TO tackle *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the early 1950s, on rolls of paper he took from the newspaper where he worked as a struggling reporter in Barranquilla, Colombia. He lived in a hotel alongside ladies of the night, because the rent was cheap, and loved to tell people how the prostitutes let him borrow their soap. When Gabo finally finished writing the story of "a tropical town called Macondo that doesn't appear in any map," as Harss called it, he sent the manuscript to the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. It was a monstrous tome, or "mamotreto," as Gabo referred to it. When Fuentes read the last page, he wrote to his friend to say that the novel's magnificence had left him "crushed."

One Hundred Years was published in June 1967 in Argentina. Legend has it that when its first print run of 10,000 copies sold out in the region in three weeks, Gabo asked the publisher to send him his royalties in cash so he and his family could feel more viscerally that what was happening was real. Three

FAMILY: HARRY RANSOM CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN. TYPEWRITER: NTB/ALAMY.
COVER: COURTESY OF MICHAEL DIRUGGIERO/MANHATTAN RARE BOOK COMPANY. PREVIOUS SPREAD: MAURO GONZÁLEZ /NETFLIX © 2024.





years later, when the book was published in the United States, *The New York Times* called it a South American Genesis. Gabo won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1982. In Latin America he has since reached godlike status.

I came to know Gabo's work because I was born in Barranquilla, the port city where he worked as a reporter, and my childhood was imbued with the same exuberant spirit and storytelling that powered his work. I met him in 1995 when I was a freelance journalist in New York and applied to a writing workshop he was giving in Cartagena. It was three unforgettable days, during which he advised us that our goal as storytellers was to grip readers entirely: "Writing is a hypnotic act." I noticed how much Gabo liked to name-drop—Fidel Castro had once eaten 18 scoops of ice cream in front of him—but I was most struck by how much he reminded me of my own family. I was in awe of the way he had turned the humdrum daily experiences of Caribbean life into a literary kingdom with universal heft.

Did Gabo manage to write Latin America's *Don Quixote*? "It is a groundbreaking work of art," says Gene Bell-Villada, coeditor of the *Oxford Handbook of Gabriel García Márquez*. To which his editing partner, Ignacio López-Calvo, adds: "This book is actually the embodiment of world literature,

"LOOK AT HOW EXHAUSTIVE GABO WAS. EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING IS BASED IN REALITY."



THE ACTOR WHO PLAYS THE OLDER JOSÉ ARCADIO BUENDÍA CAN'T BELIEVE THAT LIFE HAS GIVEN HIM THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY SUCH AN EMBLEMATIC CHARACTER, EVEN THOUGH HE SPENDS MUCH OF HIS TIME ON SET TIED TO A TREE.



AN EXODUS
Behind the scenes of the Netflix series: Young José Arcadio Buendía (played by Marco Antonio González) and young Úrsula Iguarán (Susana Morales) search for land where they can build the town that will be Macondo.

circulating worldwide, being translated to so many languages, and being appreciated and imitated by so many readers and writers throughout the world." It still has hold. Last fall Dua Lipa posted a photo of herself holding the novel. "It's irresistible," she wrote.

Before *One Hundred Years,* few had heard the term *magical realism.* Now it's routinely used to evoke the literature of a whole continent. Gabo's formula, which took about 17 years to cook, mixed Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* and the *Spanish Chronicles of the Indies* with Faulkner and Hemingway. He overlaid the techniques of his literary masters onto stories that he collected firsthand, especially from the first eight years of his life, when he lived with his grandparents in Aracataca, a backward town that had experienced the wars, booms, and busts that he went on to describe in his imaginary Macondo. Latin American writers have lived with the shadow of García Márquez and of magical realism ever since. Writers like Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel were greatly influenced by him. Others, like Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet and the Mexican writer Jorge Volpi, overtly rejected his influence and defied admonitions that if their novels didn't feature flying grandmothers, they had no chance of being published in the United States.

The label has proven impossible to dodge. "I write realism," the novelist Guadalupe Nettel tells me on the phone from Mexico City. One of her short stories is about a family that eats insects to reverse a curse, so reviewers refer to her work as magical realism. "But I write it as realism," she says. "In Mexico, we have these customs. Still, in the US, they call 'magical realism' whatever they can't label."

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ'S near-mythical ascent from a nobody born in a remote Colombian town to the world's most widely read Spanish-language writer is filled with all kinds of lore. Some of the mythmaking was instigated by Gabo himself: He had a mischievous desire to inflate his own story as if it were one of his fictions. As he wrote in a wry note to Fuentes: "I was no savior when it came to Mexican film. But I do believe I can be of much help in our efforts to bring Latin American novels to the world."

With its lavish two-part 16-episode adaptation, Netflix hopes to introduce new audiences to the saga of the seven generations of the doomed Buendía family and their eccentric, wild, passionate, corrupt, innocent, voluble, incestuous, beautiful, sad, and often mad lives in Macondo.

It's a momentous (and risky) endeavor. I ask Francisco Ramos, Netflix's VP of Latin American content and godfather of the project, if *One Hundred Years* will be a tropical version of two other hit series centered around families, *Game of Thrones* and *The Crown.* "Well," he tells me via video call from Mexico City without missing a beat, "the Buendías are certainly more fun than the Windsors." The raw material is all there. As García Márquez knew so well, the hard part lies in the execution.

Gabo always loved film. His eldest son, Rodrigo García Barcha, himself a writer-director of films, recalls his father's love for Akira Kurosawa's *Red Beard,* Truffaut's *Jules et Jim,* and Alain Resnais's *Providence,* to name a few. He also loved Sam Peckinpah and had a soft spot for the Italian neorealists. García Barcha remembers that when he was in his early teens, his parents took him to see *Last Tango in Paris* and *The Story of Adele H.*

By the '70s, after Gabo had become relatively wealthy, he spent a lot of time and money on the moving image. He was involved in TV production in Colombia, wrote scripts, and helped set up a film school in Cuba, where he gave screenwriting workshops. Fernando Restrepo, his partner in the Colombian venture, once told me that Gabo tried to set up a film production company that he planned to call Solitude & Company, which I later borrowed for the title of an oral history I wrote about his life.

Two of his most beloved works—*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*—have been turned into movies, but neither did the novels justice. The former, directed by Francesco Rosi, played like a misguided Italian operetta. The latter, directed by Mike Newell, was cartoonish and overdramatized and starred non-Colombian actors who spoke in English in the lead roles. "Truly awful," López-Calvo says by email of many of the adaptations, adding



that he thinks the small screen will suit the novel well. "A TV series seems ideal today for such a complex and sophisticated work. And television series have changed dramatically in recent years.... Perhaps Gabo would've been okay with it today, who knows!"

López-Calvo is referring to the fact that Gabo never wanted his most famous book to be made into a film, preferring readers to imagine the characters for themselves. He said it would take 100 hours to tell the story properly, and that the only way he could even begin to conceive of an acceptable adaptation was if it were in Spanish and shot in Colombia.

But in truth, Gabo said many things, and often they were purposefully contradictory. He loved hanging out with Hollywood stars—he visited Robert Redford at the Sundance Institute, and Francis Ford Coppola once cooked pasta at his house in Havana—even as he declined to sell the rights to his masterwork to luminaries including William Friedkin, Werner Herzog, and Dino De Laurentis. There is, however, an obscure Japanese adaptation from 1981. Shortly after Gabo's death in 2014, I asked his agent, the legendary Carmen Balcells, if there would ever be a true and full adaptation of the novel. Her answer was absolute: "He never wanted a film made of *One Hundred Years*. And even today it's a desire respected by his family—which I think will be upheld forever." His children have a different recollection of their father's wishes. "He was always a little tempted to make the books into movies," says García Barcha, but "he said no so many times that the offers disappeared."

Gabo's widow, Mercedes, died in 2020, so now all decisions are in the hands of García Barcha and his brother, Gonzalo. "Gabo said to us that once he was dead, we could do whatever we wanted," García Barcha says. "'Just don't bother me.'" Such a proclamation sounds to me like the lapidary phrases that Gabo would give to one of his characters. The author's son follows up with one of his own: "It is the living that have to make decisions."

The brothers have been criticized in some quarters for allowing the Netflix adaptation and for the recent publication of *Until August,* an unfinished novel that Gabo, already suffering from advanced dementia, had ordered to be destroyed. The book has had mixed reviews: mostly glowing and respectful in Colombia, terrible in the United States. "When I read that we are being greedy, I feel sad for a few minutes, but ultimately these are the decisions we have to make," says García Barcha.

"I DON'T WANT NETFLIX TO TELL ME WHAT COLONEL AURELIANO BUENDÍA LOOKS LIKE. I'VE ALWAYS IMAGINED HE LOOKS LIKE MY GRANDFATHER. AS EVERY COLOMBIAN HAS."

IN 2018, RAMOS, who had just been appointed to his new post at Netflix, was ready to take the streamer's Latin American offerings to another level. Netflix's philosophy of going local had already proven effective worldwide: *The Crown* is British. *Squid Game* is South Korean. *Money Heist* is Spanish. *The House of Flowers* is Mexican. It was time to replicate this formula in South American countries. (*Narcos* takes place in Colombia and Mexico, but it's a Netflix US production.) The idea of adapting *One Hundred Years* started to float around in corporate meetings, and it stuck. Ramos ran with it—but first he had to negotiate with Mercedes, who was still part of the estate's decision-making at the time. Gabo's family demanded that the series be as long as the story required, that it be in Spanish, and that it be filmed in Colombia. Gabo's sons came on board as executive producers.

Macondo was built near Ibagué, a town in the Andes. It's far from the Caribbean, but it has a similar mountainous topography to the area around Aracataca, where the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta cascade into the sea. Eugenio Caballero (*Pan's Labyrinth*) and Bárbara Enríquez (*Roma*) have designed the sets, so Macondo-in-the-Andes promises to be gorgeous. On set, as in the novel, Macondo transforms from a settlement of straw-roofed huts for 20 families into a full-blown town. It's all been built in human scale. You can walk around the Buendía house, the pharmacy, the bar, and the market.

Some of Gabo's most ardent fans will be wary of seeing characters that have lived in their imaginations for the last six decades. "I don't want Netflix to tell me what Colonel Aureliano Buendía looks like," says Colombian-born Gustavo Arango, a professor of literature and author of two books about García Márquez. "I've always imagined he looks like my grandfather. As every Colombian has."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE
Below: José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula Iguarán's nuptials. Opposite: Fur traffickers cross the desert on their way to Macondo.

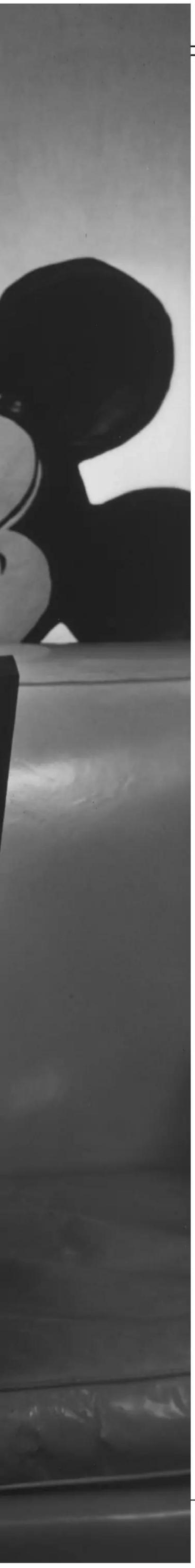
But when I'm shown some early footage in Bogotá, I enjoy seeing those faces in locations that, to me, seem out of a biblical Colombia. I recognize the arrival of Melquíades, the gypsy who disturbs the idyllic hamlet when he appears with his impressive magnet and his magnifying glass; and the advent of Rebeca, the child that eats earth with her hands. I enjoy the anger with which the Buendía patriarch receives the government official who comes to his front door thinking he can tell the people of Macondo what to do. The costumes are elaborate, every detail perfectly curated. The actors all have amazing faces. There are no stars in the production, although many are respected local actors, including Claudio Cataño as Colonel Aureliano Buendía, Marleyda Soto as the older Úrsula Iguarán, and Diego Vásquez as the older José Arcadio Buendía. The nonactors prepared by attending theater workshops.

Like the novel, the *One Hundred Years* series is sparing with dialogue. "It's certainly not *Succession,*" says Alex García López, the principal director, on a video call from Barcelona. (Some of the one-liners I hear are memorable, however: When Úrsula Iguarán gives birth to her first child, "he is born with women's buttocks.") García López also tells me that the series won't be like the "phantasmagorical CONTINUED ON PAGE 102



REBECA, CELEBRATION, AND PREVIOUS SPREAD: MAURO GONZÁLEZ/NETFLIX © 2024.





OF MICE AND MAN
Walt Disney, photographed by Edward Steichen for *Vanity Fair* in 1933.

Bibbidi Bobbidi WHO?

Disney is on the hunt for a new CEO to replace the legendary **Bob Iger** when he retires (again) at the end of 2026. Inside a $200 billion kingdom looking for a new king—or, for the first time ever, a queen

BY **Natalie Jarvey** AND **Joy Press**

Last October, **Bob Iger** donned shades and a ceremonial black robe to help choose the finalists for the Disney employees' Halloween costume contest.

It was a warm day on the studio lot in Burbank, California, and the CEO's top lieutenants joined him to help with the judging. A George Lucas look-alike paraded by, which made Iger smile, then a merry Mary Poppins. But it had been a painful year at the Magic Kingdom, and the group representing Disneyland's Haunted Mansion tilted a little dark. One of them hoisted a sign with a hatchet, dripping blood, a picture of Iger altered so he was smiling like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* and the words, "I'm BaaaCK!! 4 DAYS A WEEK BABY!!" The hatchet was presumably a symbol for cuts and layoffs, the creepy prose a reference to Iger's unpopular return-to-work policy. "The vibe has been tough," one Disney employee told us earlier this year. "They really put us through the ringer."

In November 2022, Iger made a surprise return to Disney following a much-heralded (and very brief) retirement to clean up the messes created by his handpicked successor, Bob Chapek, and deal with a radically altered entertainment landscape. Within a year, he eliminated 8,000 positions as part of a $7.5 billion cost cutting plan. Several of the company's recent sequels, live-action remakes, and IP efforts had disappointed at the box office. Wall Street was pressuring him to make Disney+ profitable. The debilitating actors and writers strikes were underway. And billionaire activist investor Nelson Peltz was threatening an assault on the Magic Kingdom. The CEO's latest contract is set to expire at the end of 2026, after he turns 75, and some of the lieutenants who helped him judge the costume contest are now in the running to be America's next top Iger.

Iger has always been clear: He loves running Disney. But if he was reluctant to retire in the past, he doesn't appear to be now. By many accounts, the succession question is now a top priority as he and the Disney board narrow in on a handful of internal candidates and consider potential external candidates. The board essentially rubber-stamped Iger's last choice. It won't this time. "Bob Chapek may be the biggest mistake Bob Iger made in his career," says Bank of America analyst Jessica Reif Ehrlich. A source with close ties to Disney puts it more colorfully: "The board royally fucked up last time."

Disney's board is now stacked with executives who handled their own smooth handoffs. A source familiar with the process says the company won't make a decision this year. Ideally, it *will* in 2025 so Iger can bring the CEO in waiting up to speed and show them Disney's version of the nuclear codes. It's said that there are now four key internal candidates, who have to figure out how to lobby for the job without *looking* like they're lobbying for the job: Disney Entertainment cochairmen Dana Walden and Alan Bergman, ESPN chairman Jimmy Pitaro, and Disney Experiences chairman Josh D'Amaro. There's also a massive Disney workforce treading on the tippiest of toes. "People don't know which horse to bet on," says the source with close ties. "They're afraid to cross anybody."

ANYONE WHO THINKS *Succession* was entirely about the Murdochs hasn't spent much time studying Disney. Michael Eisner, who preceded Iger as CEO, left the company after a shareholder revolt. Eisner was a charming but capricious executive who hadn't always been convinced Iger was ideal for the job. Iger had joined Disney in 1996, following its acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC, having worked his way up from weatherman at a small cable station to top TV exec. Here's the with-friends-like-these memo Eisner wrote confidants on the board about Iger when he was mulling potential replacements years before his departure: "He is not an enlightened or brilliantly creative man, but with a strong board he absolutely could do the job."

Once Iger had the gig, he also found it hard to relinquish. After extending his contract several times, he set up a bake-off between two of his top lieutenants with an eye toward succession. Later, Iger reportedly lost confidence in the winning baker, who quickly left the company. Iger's contract was extended again in 2017. "I'm serious about it this time," he told an audience, meaning his retirement as CEO. Later that year, Disney announced a deal ultimately worth more than $70 billion to acquire the lion's share of 21st Century Fox's film and TV assets and re-upped his contract *again*. Though he finally stepped down as CEO in 2020, he didn't even truly retire, instead becoming executive chairman for another 22 months. Chapek took over right in time for the devastating pandemic—and his relationship with Iger reportedly disintegrated. He didn't last three years in the role.

After Iger returned as CEO, the board tacked an extra two years onto his new contract to give him enough time to get succession right. Disney is the second biggest entertainment company in the world, after Netflix. It's worth more than



DANA WALDEN



BOB IGER



JOSH D'AMARO



ALAN BERGMAN



JIMMY PITARO

$200 billion and has swallowed, among other things, Lucasfilm, Marvel, and most of Fox. It operates more like a small country (population: 225,000) than your average entertainment conglomerate. Many of its workers—or cast members as they're earnestly called in the parks division—are loyal to the company in a way that borders on nationalism. Who could possibly oversee it all?

One Disney employee characterizes the race as "an open ball game," but most Hollywood insiders believe that it's Walden's job to lose. "The word about succession is that it's all Dana all the time," says a top agent. Walden, 59, is a longtime TV executive with a Svengali-like ability to woo talent. She also has a close relationship with Iger, her neighbor in tony Brentwood, where they regularly stroll among the mansions. Walden's three-decade-long career in television likely reminds Iger of his own path to the top, even if that means she might have blind spots when it comes to the theme parks or the ESPN business. A former Disney executive who worked closely with Walden says, "I think she could be great, but it's not going to be a slam dunk."

Others, meanwhile, are convinced that D'Amaro, 53, will take the throne. When he travels to the theme parks, people line

IGER: JC OLIVERA. BERGMAN: VALERIE MACON/AFP. PITARO: AMANDA EDWARDS. D'AMARO: WALT DISNEY COMPANY. WALDEN: TOMMASO BODDI. ALL: GETTY IMAGES.

BOB'S YOUR UNCLE

Sources say one of four key Disney executives will likely replace Bob Iger as CEO. Here's the cast of characters.

BOB IGER, CEO
An iconic leader who oversaw some of Disney's most prosperous years. His handpicked replacement was ousted by the board in fairly short order, so Iger unretired to right the ship.

DANA WALDEN, COCHAIRMAN, ENTERTAINMENT
A savvy TV executive who's a force in Hollywood and has helped steward shows as different as *24*, *Modern Family*, *Glee*, and *Abbott Elementary*. She's close to Iger, and they've had similar trajectories.

ALAN BERGMAN, COCHAIRMAN, ENTERTAINMENT
Runs Disney's sprawling (and lately beleaguered) film business. He's a former finance exec, but he's been studying up on the creative side. James Cameron likes him, a rare badge of honor for a studio chief.

JOSH D'AMARO, CHAIRMAN, EXPERIENCES
The parks chief received a serious vote of confidence recently when the company doubled its investment in his fiefdom to roughly $60 billion. D'Amaro, who is treated like a celebrity when he walks through Disneyland, is said to have inspired an "Iger-like cult of personality."

JIMMY PITARO, CHAIRMAN, ESPN
A down-to-earth guy running a declining cable business that's making enormous bets this year. Pitaro has worked in more corners of Disney than his peers. He's based in Connecticut but has worked for Iger for years and is said to have a deft touch with talent.

up to meet him. Tall and silver-haired, D'Amaro is the executive who seems most built in Iger's mold, able to charm hourly workers and visiting dignitaries in equal measure. In Hollywood, however, he's a relative unknown. "Josh has a very Iger-like cult of personality," says another former Disney executive. "Does he understand how to operate a media business though? Especially a media business that is dealing with the onset of AI and all these other threats to the business? I don't know."

Pitaro, 54, and Bergman, 58, are less obvious choices for CEO, though there's still time. The former is well-liked and has a background running Disney Interactive that gives him perspective on how to position Disney for a streaming future. But he's got his hands full launching the flagship ESPN streaming service and a sports streaming joint venture. As for Bergman, he's a veteran finance executive who assumed sole control of Disney's film business two years ago. He's now focused on reenergizing the movie slate after an uneven few years for Pixar, Marvel, and Lucasfilm.

Disney employees, to their credit, can be as tight-lipped as the Secret Service. Iger and the executives in contention to replace him did not comment for this story, but a spokesman sent a statement, which read in part: "The Disney Board is engaged in a robust and thorough succession planning process to identify Disney's next CEO and there are currently no designated frontrunners among the very strong candidates being considered, despite any uninformed speculation to the contrary." Interviews with more than 40 sources, both inside Disney and out, paint a picture of a beloved brand that has a chance to set Hollywood's course for years to come if it can just settle on the right captain.

ON NOVEMBER 20, 2022, Walden stopped by the American Music Awards, which ABC was broadcasting from Downtown LA, then hurried to Dodger Stadium for Elton John's farewell tour, which Disney+ live streamed. As if that weren't enough excitement for one evening, an email hit every Disney inbox that night: Iger was coming back. When staffers got the announcement, some were momentarily confused—"We thought we'd clicked on an old email," recalls an executive—and then they were elated. Less than three years earlier, Iger had handed the CEO reins to Chapek, a Disney veteran who had shepherded the theme park and consumer products businesses to new heights. Now Chapek was out, and Iger—who'd been sporting a salt-and-pepper retirement beard and boasting about his carefree new life—was returning for a second stint leading the company.

The years that Chapek ran the company were rough on morale. Yes, the pandemic was a nightmare that decimated theme parks and movie theaters overnight. But Chapek, a hard-nosed number cruncher from Indiana, made some profound PR gaffes, like the poor handling of a lawsuit brought by Scarlett Johansson over the streaming release of *Black Widow* and his initially out-of-touch response to Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, which eroded trust with Disney's progressive employee base. (Chapek changed course on the latter.) When Iger returned, Disney's stock surged. The man who'd overseen one of the most prosperous periods in Disney history was once again in charge of Mickey, Buzz Lightyear, Iron Man, and Han Solo. "We were all relieved," an executive says.

Walden had a particularly good reason to celebrate. Under Chapek, creative executives had been stripped of financial decision-making authority. Iger restored it. He also handed significantly more power over streaming to Walden, film chief Bergman, and ESPN's Pitaro. For Hollywood, it seemed like a sign that they were being set up as potential successors. It had been a remarkable rise for Walden, whom Iger tapped to come aboard Disney after acquiring most of Fox in 2019. She now oversees a broad portfolio that includes ABC, FX, Freeform, and the Disney Channel, which she is managing as the traditional TV business declines. *The Bear* has been a surprise awards juggernaut. *Abbott Elementary* has set records for ABC and brought broadcast TV back into the conversation. Walden is a highly visible force in Hollywood. Now she needs to produce hits for Disney+ while reining in costs.

> "People don't know which horse to bet on. **They're afraid to cross anybody.**"

Walden started at Fox as a publicist in the 1990s. When she moved into programming, she demonstrated an uncanny understanding of the zeitgeist. *Modern Family, 24, Glee*—she had a hand in making them all hits. About a decade ago, she and her partner running Fox had dinner with Dan Fogelman, a screenwriter on Disney kids classics *Cars* and *Tangled,* during a fallow period in his career. Fogelman recalls her saying, "I'm ready to make a bet on you. I want to give you the environment where you're nurtured and protected and where the right decisions are made to support you." Not long after, he turned in a script for a family drama called *This Is Us.* It became the number one new show on TV in the 18-to-49 demographic and ran for six seasons. "She just completely held up her end of the bargain," says Fogelman. "She really is part guru, part decision-maker. This business needs more decision-makers who have firm points of view and are not afraid to state them."

People who worked for Walden at Fox say she could be a challenging boss, though it should be noted that the company encouraged scrappy, entrepreneurial hustle—and that women leaders in Hollywood are often subjected to more scrutiny than their male counterparts. "She had a spidey sense for everybody's vulnerabilities and went right at 'em," says a former employee. "If you were doing a great job, sometimes she would praise you, but oftentimes she would make you feel terrible to keep you off-balance and to make you work even harder." Some say Walden's edges have softened at Disney.

Kelly Ripa says it was Walden's idea to make Ripa's husband, Mark Consuelos, her cohost on *Live,* adding that "it was the first smooth transition that I've experienced" in 20-plus years. *Grey's Anatomy* icon Ellen Pompeo credits Walden with helping keep her at Disney. "Dana was a huge part of me continuing on in this role," she says. "She's a strong leader who values talent relationships and has found ways to keep me at Disney, to let me grow and feel creative." Many people would follow Walden to the ends of the earth. "There is something very charismatic about her," says the former employee. "You felt like you were working for somebody who was really smart, almost clairvoyant."

baby, she helped him get into the best hospital for treatment. During those panicky early days of COVID, when Fogelman thought his newborn son might have been infected, Walden worked the phones to get advice from doctors. "Dana is the person everyone in town calls in the event of an emergency," says Murphy.

Disney has never been led by a woman. Even the source close to Disney, who points out that Walden doesn't have as much financial experience as some of the other candidates, says, "From an entertainment and creative perspective, Dana would be a fantastic choice—and a historic choice."

LAST JULY, DISNEY held a premiere for its *Haunted Mansion* movie at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. SAG-AFTRA members had just gone on strike, so none of the stars were on hand to walk the red carpet. Mickey, Minnie, and Cruella de Vil posed for photos with fans instead. Bergman, who runs the film side of the entertainment business, was having a bumpy summer.

Barbie and *Oppenheimer* became a two-headed phenomenon for Warner Bros. and Universal, but Disney's attempt at a blockbuster, *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny,* failed to meet expectations. *Haunted Mansion* fared poorly.

are born and, if destiny smiles, become plush toys or theme park rides. Bergman has been at the studio for 23 years. Until longtime film executive Alan Horn retired in 2021, though, he always reported to or worked closely with an executive with deep creative experience. Bergman came from the world of finance, which is certainly an asset. "If you threw up a spreadsheet, he'd absorb it in 30 seconds and send questions back at you, so you better be tight on the numbers," says an executive who worked with him.

Bergman is often considered a more business-oriented executive, but Horn says he spent a lot of his career learning the creative side of running a film studio. "During my 10 years, I invited him to every single script meeting, every cut of a movie, every interaction I had with creative leaders, and he came to every single one," he says. "I haven't seen his SATs or anything, but this guy's a very smart guy. So I know that he listened. Why did he listen? Because it was important to him to learn the creative side." When Horn let his friend Iger know that he planned to retire, he told him that Bergman could do the job.

Bergman, who owns a Napa Valley vineyard with his family, is said to be fond of classic Disney IP, and sources say his love for the brand runs deep. He presides over a large portfolio, including animated

The years that Iger's last replacement ran the company were rough. **"Bob Chapek may be the biggest mistake Bob Iger made in his career,"** says a source.

Many of Walden's closest friends are people who used to work for her, or still do. Ryan Murphy met her in the early 2000s and with her support went on to make *Glee* for Fox. She is now the godmother of his three sons, and when one of them was diagnosed with cancer as a

Even *The Little Mermaid* underperformed in theaters, forcing Disney to contend with racist critiques about casting Black actor Halle Bailey as Ariel.

Disney is a many-tentacled enterprise, but its success begins and ends with the film studios. That's where characters

films, blockbusters, and smaller prestige movies like *Poor Things.* James Cameron didn't know Bergman well when he began making the *Avatar* sequel for Disney but says he grew comfortable with him after test screenings suggested there was still work to be CONTINUED ON PAGE 108



MAN WITH A PLAN
Roger Carstens, special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, near the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.

TAKE NO PRISONERS

The State Department's hostage point man, Roger Carstens, works to free US citizens from captivity, whether they're being held by Vladimir Putin or Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro. **ADAM CIRALSKY** embeds with America's top negotiators through 15 months of rescue efforts with the highest of stakes: liberty or death

PHOTOGRAPH BY
NORMAN JEAN ROY

PART ONE

At dawn on October 1, 2022,

Osman Khan was roused from his cell inside Venezuela's notorious subterranean prison known as the House of Dreams.

Khan was a fresh-faced Floridian, all of 24 and barely out of college. Nine months before, he had made the fateful mistake of crossing the border into Venezuela to meet his girlfriend's family, only to find himself in the clutches of one of the dictatorship's dreaded security services. For weeks, his interrogators subjected him to torture of all kinds: waterboarding, electric shocks, beatings, stress positions, extreme confinement, and forced injections, which his family says induced grand mal seizures. One of his torturers went by the nickname the Piranha. Khan was incarcerated in a pariah state beset by gangs, rampant corruption, and humanitarian crises—a country that considered his homeland a mortal enemy.

"It was hell," recalled his sister Jasmin, who, while finishing her master's at Georgetown, was putting in long hours as Khan's advocate in Washington. His incarceration had enveloped the close-knit family. "My mom is the strongest person ever," said Jasmin, "but it definitely broke her. She was telling me, 'If something happens to me, it's your job to get your brother out.' She was thinking of committing suicide." Khan had already tried to take his own life, but his captors had intervened.

The Venezuelans alleged that Khan was not what he claimed to be: a love-struck young man who had innocently entered their nation. Instead, they maintained, he was a CIA assassin dispatched to kill President Nicolás Maduro, who in 2013, after the death of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, had wrested control of the beleaguered oil-rich nation, going on to establish a ruthless far-left dictatorship. As evidence, Khan's minders produced a Google Map printout of Miraflores, Venezuela's White House, which they claimed to have found among his possessions.

"The only thing Osman could assassinate is a hamburger," recounted Matthew Heath, a 42-year-old retired Marine from Tennessee who had been in custody for more than a year by the time Khan appeared. "Casa de Los Sueños is a funny name because it sounds like day care," Heath observed. "Oh, the House of Dreams, I'll drop the kids off. But only a terrorist or a hardened criminal would have any kind of preparation to be in a place like that."

Heath, with his Southern twang, slicked-back white hair, and translucent blue eyes, formed an unlikely bond with Khan, a Cuban Pakistani American, whom Heath treated like a kid brother, sharing food and clothing. Heath also shared something just as valuable: lessons he had learned in Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) school.

Heath was no ordinary grunt. Having received specialized training and taken part in sensitive military missions, he had become a habitual headache for his captors. He acted irrationally and unpredictably, defying orders and going out of his way to keep his jailers confused and irritated—all in a bid to improve his conditions. "I'm gonna do whatever I can to ruin the day for the guys working at the prison," he told me. He advised Khan to resist on his own terms, tapping into his inner reserves of defiance. Heath characterized his own methodology this way: "I went with the North Korea option. I would be randomly and extremely violent. At any provocation, I made a big deal out of it. If they tried to mess with me, it's going to end up with me probably in the infirmary."

That's exactly where Heath landed after staging what he later termed a mock suicide in late June 2022, slicing a forearm so that it bled enough to terrify his jailers but not enough to kill him. He wound up in a military hospital while Khan remained behind in the House of Dreams where he, in turn, paid forward Heath's kindness and shared the gospel of resistance with a more recent American arrival, a lawyer named Eyvin Hernandez.

Hernandez's imprisonment was not only cruel and unusual, but also deeply ironic. Incarcerated by a far-left government, the 45-year-old from South Central had spent years representing the poor and working class as an LA County public defender. In his spare time, he was an avid bachata dancer and a rabid Raiders fan. Yet his Venezuelan guards, for all their socialist swagger, refused to regard the Salvadoran-born American as anything but a subversive. In March 2022, they picked him up near the Colombian border—where, his family said, the unmarried man had been helping a female friend sort out her immigration paperwork—and then deposited him at the House of Dreams. He was charged with conspiracy to commit terrorism.

"This place is meant to break you psychologically and spiritually," Hernandez said of his surroundings in a voice memo left on his brother's phone—a message meant for President Joe Biden. "The uncertainty, the isolation, the daily human rights violations, are taking their toll and are having their intended effect on us. Two people have already tried to commit suicide and one is on the brink." Imploring the leader of the free world to act, his message ended ominously: "If you don't get us out soon, then there might not be anyone left to save."

THERE ARE NOW nearly 40 Americans held in a half dozen countries, citizens US officials are working to free. They include well-known cases like the five American nationals believed to be alive in Gaza, as well as former Marine Paul Whelan and *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, both imprisoned in Russia on specious espionage charges. Other high-profile detainees have been successfully recovered. In December 2022, WNBA star Brittney Griner, having been sentenced to nine years in a Russian penal colony for possessing cannabis oil, was released in a trade for convicted arms trafficker Viktor Bout. Last September, five detainees, held on a variety of charges that the Biden administration labeled as spurious, were released from custody in Iran—in exchange for five Iranians held in the US and $6 billion in frozen funds, to which Tehran would be granted access for use in humanitarian efforts. (According to the State Department, the money, transferred to restricted accounts in Qatar, was

US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

effectively blocked from Iranian access after Hamas, an Iran-backed, US-designated terrorist group, went on its killing and kidnapping spree.)

For years I had followed the cases of Americans in peril, but from afar—first while working as a CIA lawyer and later as a journalist and filmmaker covering national security affairs. Still, the back-channel negotiations, the shape-shifting intermediaries, and the multipronged maneuvers to liberate US detainees were just not on my radar. That is, until August 2022, when I met Roger Carstens at a rooftop bar in Foggy Bottom.

I had known Carstens, 59, since the late aughts, when I was working in TV news and he was cooling his heels at a Washington think tank. Gregarious and good-looking, he had graduated from West Point in the fabled class of '86; two of his fellow cadets, Mike Pompeo and Mark Esper, would later become Donald Trump's secretaries of state and defense. (Pompeo also served a stint as CIA director.) Carstens, who bears a passing resemblance to Hugh Jackman, was class president at the US Military Academy—and a bit of a rebel.

"At West Point, I had the distinct honor of being a century man. I walked 158 punishment tours," he says of the misconduct infractions that found him pacing the quadrangle for hours on weekends in dress uniform, carrying a rifle. Eventually he got with the program, rising through the ranks of Special Forces and making Zelig-like appearances in war zones on four continents. He then took a break to study the great books before returning to government as a deputy assistant secretary at the State Department.

To hear Carstens tell it, his career first took shape when, as an 11-year-old in Spokane, he read about the Cambodian genocide, learning how the world stood by as some 2 million perished in the Khmer Rouge's killing fields. Raised in a Christian home where the Bible was a staple, he was determined to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate. In time, he came to regard the US Army as "the most successful human rights organization in history when it comes to liberating vulnerable people." It's what took him to West Point and later to Special Forces, where the motto is *De oppresso liber,* "Free the oppressed."

By the time we connected for drinks, Carstens had assumed a new title, special



ALL THE RIGHT MOVES
Carstens, en route to free US detainees, rehearses the handover, using chocolates and cell phones, 2022.

presidential envoy for hostage affairs (SPEHA), and an awesome responsibility: retrieving Americans who are wrongfully detained by nation-states or held hostage by terrorist groups or criminal syndicates. For decades, pearl-clutching policymakers have proclaimed that the United States does not negotiate with terrorists or hostage takers. But in his role, Carstens is uniquely empowered to bargain with and browbeat as many militants, despots, and assorted ne'er-do-wells as necessary. He now held a job that, in its way, embodied the last line of the soldier's creed: "I will never leave a fallen comrade."

Since 2020—under Trump and now Biden—Carstens has helped repatriate scores of citizens languishing abroad. His modus operandi is to engage with anyone and everyone—heads of state, spies, businessmen, clergy, activists, aid workers, even journalists—who might have a bead on, or the ability to influence, those holding Americans. He is at once patient and impatient, ready to make, rescind, or recalibrate offers and willing to chase leads and endure setbacks, until, at last, the smallest of openings results in a breakthrough.

His big personality masks great faith. "I pray a lot for the families," he confided. "I pray a lot for the people that are being held. I also pray for the people holding them. I'll lift a dictator up in a second to God and say, 'Lord, whatever this man is going through, please give him whatever he needs to release our citizens.'"

As special envoy, Carstens spends hours every day on family engagement—calls, emails, texts. These are not easy interactions since he is both the face of and the whipping boy for the government's hostage-related efforts. Things that may not be his fault are nevertheless his problem. "The bottom line for my office and this president and secretary of state," he told me, "is that if you have a blue passport and you are wrongfully detained or held hostage, your country's coming to get you."

What had caught my attention at the bar, though, was a single data point he mentioned in passing. Nearly a quarter of his caseload, he said, involved Americans detained in one country, Venezuela. I knew that Maduro had turned the country into such an abject disaster that more than 6 million people had fled in recent years—with untold numbers streaming across the southern US border. But I found it simply baffling that Maduro—a bus driver turned strongman upon whom the US has placed a $15 million bounty—was holding more American captives than his worldlier and more practiced patrons in Havana, Moscow, and Tehran.

The more I learned, the more I wondered. How had Maduro's House of

Dreams become a place to warehouse human beings as political pawns? And why wasn't it front-page news? I sought permission from the White House and State Department to embed with what they call the hostage enterprise.

For well over a year, I traveled to seven countries, observed negotiations firsthand, witnessed successful and unsuccessful recovery missions, interviewed dozens of officials as well as former hostages, their families, and those whose loved ones remain detained. This article (and a documentary in progress) amounts to an inside look at the US government's commitment to freeing hostages, viewed through the prism of Venezuela, a nation whose vast oil reserves make it an outsize player on the regional and international stage.

I PERSONALLY THOUGHT THE job should have gone to a lawyer," recounted Robert O'Brien, who held the SPEHA post before becoming Trump's fourth and final national security adviser. "Someone with a high-stakes legal background and a lot of negotiating skills. But I saw Roger's CV and I met him and was really impressed, and so I urged the president to immediately give him the title of ambassador."

"Roger's just done a hell of a job," he said. "Our adversaries know that this is a guy who could roll up a newspaper and kill you with it. But at the same time, like most Green Berets I've met, he gets along with people, he's a diplomat, he finds common ground. When you're doing these negotiations, even if you've got a thug or a bad guy on the other side of the table, you've got to build rapport to get to the outcome you want. And Roger's very good at doing that."

Carstens is the highest-ranking Trump-appointed holdover. Hostage families—who kiddingly refer to him as Captain America—lobbied the incoming president to keep him. "If Biden is looking for an issue around which he can build a bipartisan bridge, I can think of none more appropriate than working together for the safe return of Americans held hostage abroad," wrote *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian, who himself was unjustly detained in Iran for 544 days. "Carstens is the right sort of mission-driven public servant to lead the effort. Countless initiatives are disrupted by the transition from one administration to the next. But with the lives of fellow Americans at stake, politics should not interfere."

Critics have long argued that America should not make deals with tyrants and terrorists. Such engagement, they contend, promotes state-sponsored blackmail, helps legitimize malign regimes, and encourages more abductions. (Not so, according to recent patterns. Despite the deals the US has made to free hostages, Russia alone, to use grim diplomatic parlance, seems to aggressively "restock the pond" with Americans.) In fact, facilitating the release of US hostages is one of the rare foreign policy initiatives that enjoys widespread support among Republicans and Democrats. Consider this: A congressional resolution last June calling for the Russians to release Gershkovich passed 422 to 0.

In 2021, Biden, who prides himself on trying to reach across the aisle, kept Trump's envoy on the payroll. And his administration has reaped the benefits, obtaining some 45 releases. (Despite Trump's criticism of the Griner deal as "a one-sided disaster" and a "stupid and unpatriotic embarrassment for the USA," he has boasted on Truth Social: "I brought 58 HOSTAGES home from many different countries, including North Korea, and I never paid anything. They all understood they MUST LET THESE PEOPLE COME HOME!")

"Roger simply is unstoppable," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken as we sat in the opulent Treaty Room at the State Department, surrounded by portraits of his predecessors. "I've rarely, if ever, worked with someone who is so absolutely determined every single morning he wakes up to bring another American home—and who does it with extraordinary energy, extraordinary creativity, always looking for another angle, another idea, something that might work, but also just with incredible humanity. He's fundamentally motivated by the human dimension of this. And you can feel that."

IT WAS NOT always so. The SPEHA position was borne of the tragedy of incremental decisions across successive administrations. In March 2007, Robert Levinson, a retired FBI special agent, traveled to Iran's Kish Island, where he somehow became wrapped up in an unsanctioned operation that was linked back to a CIA official who was allegedly fired over the incident. (A CIA spokesperson declined to comment on the matter.) The details remain murky, but Levinson was abducted, and by the time his death was made public 13 years after his disappearance, he was believed to have been the longest-held hostage in American history.

His family was livid at what they perceived as a decade's worth of gaslighting by US officials, who seemed as eager to bury the reasons for his presence in Iran as they were to hide the lack of tools, or resolve, that might have made a rescue or a trade possible. "My dad went over there for his country and his country failed him," his daughter, Sarah Levinson Moriarty, insisted. "And the people who sent him lied instead of saving him. Because of infighting and lies they told to protect themselves, we couldn't get him home. It was the first of a series of systemic failures."

By 2015, those failures were too manifest to ignore. Three US citizens—James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig—had been executed, on camera, by members of the Islamic State. Others, including Kayla Mueller, Warren Weinstein, and Luke Somers, perished in captivity. "When you have an outcome that involves Americans being horrifically beheaded, then you know something has to change," recalled Josh Geltzer, who helped overhaul the system on President Barack Obama's watch. He is now the National Security Council legal adviser and deputy White House counsel. The Obama-era review gave rise to the Levinson Act, ratified during the waning months of the Trump administration, which created a hostage-recovery unit in the White House that Geltzer has chaired; a "fusion cell" that sits at FBI headquarters; and Carstens's shop, based at the State Department.

"The Levinson Act gave families a guidebook," Levinson's daughter said, adding, with a tinge of dark humor, "It might well have been called 'So your loved one's been taken hostage.'" The law, which sets forth criteria for designating someone a wrongful detainee, has proven critical, especially at a time when American power overseas is increasingly being challenged. Over the past decade, according to the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, there has been a 175 percent increase in the number of US nationals detained unjustly. The length of their captivity, on average, has increased by 60 percent. And that was before Hamas grabbed Americans and took them to Gaza.

ON A BRIGHT fall morning in Miami, a phalanx of officials fanned out across a private aviation facility on the north side of the city's bustling airport. They were an eclectic bunch whose roles sound like they were written for a TV procedural: a SERE psychologist, flight medics, and hostage recovery specialists. Also on hand was an FBI special agent who had flown in with papers freshly inked by the president. At the helm, dressed in khakis and a white button-down, stood Carstens.

Earlier that morning, with little notice, seven Americans were told they were going home. "My last day in Venezuela was surreal—like out of a movie," said Heath, recounting how he had learned he was being set free. "I was woken up by my primary torturer," who gave him the news. "A diplomat with a pistol, which is insane to me."

Across town, as Khan would tell family, he was handcuffed, hooded, and hustled into a blacked-out van surrounded by men jabbing him with what felt like rifles. Shortly afterward, the pair were reunited before being driven to an airfield where they found themselves in the company of five members of the so-called Citgo Six—executives of a Venezuelan American oil concern who had been held as bargaining chips for more than five years: José Pereira, Jorge Toledo, Tomeu Vadell, Alirio Zambrano, and José Luis Zambrano. (The sixth, Gustavo Cárdenas, had been released in March 2022 on humanitarian grounds.) Before taking their seats aboard a small jet, each detainee was filmed reciting his name and the day's date: October 1, 2022.

In Miami, meanwhile, as pilots finalized their flight plan, Carstens pored over the "proof of life" videos: clips of the Americans, made only moments before, that the Venezuelans had sent him via an encrypted messaging app. "These trades kind of look like old-school spy swaps," he explained. "You don't want the other side to pull a bait and switch where you think you're getting Prisoner A and instead they send you Prisoner X. So there's always a requirement to get face-to-face."

The seven men sat idling on a scorching tarmac. But to secure their release, Carstens and Blinken had had to persuade Biden to assuage Justice Department concerns and free two drug-trafficking cousins known as the Narcosobrinos (who were serving 18-year prison sentences). Their aunt is Venezuela's formidable first lady, Cilia Flores. "These are hard decisions," the secretary of state acknowledged after showing me a laminated list of American hostages that he keeps in his pocket. "We value the well-being of every citizen, whoever they are, and the government is determined when they're wrongfully detained to bring them home. If another country happens to value a spy or a thug, well, that's the value system they have. Ours is different, and I'll take ours any day."

Like Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan was also monitoring the events as Carstens and company departed Miami and headed to Canouan—a tiny island in the Grenadines—for the handover. "The level of tension in all of this is very high because you're just waiting for something to go wrong," recalled Sullivan, who told me that as the pressure mounted that day, he was in his office down the hall from the Oval. "There's deep mistrust on both sides, obviously, that has to be managed and worked through. And then there's attempting both timing and smooth execution. All of that required a steady cadence of updates to us to make sure that we were hitting our marks for each of the elements of this complex choreography."

Carstens was aboard the lead aircraft, a gleaming white Gulfstream V with blue stripes. The so-called narco-nephews sat in the rear compartment under the persistent watch of US marshals. A second American plane was also barreling south: a gray Gulfstream III with a mobile ICU—recognition that things could go sideways.

In the forward cabin of his plane, Carstens gathered the team around a large wooden tray table for an 11th-hour briefing. It all felt very *Mission: Impossible*—and very meta. A staffer captured his comments on a cell phone: "You know, when I watch these movies and the military guys are planning their operation on a plane to the objective area, I always think that's the most fake thing on earth. You plan the operation like a day or hours ahead, you load your ammunition, then you get on the plane, and you do nothing but sleep." And yet—he joked, to break the tension—"here we are, just like a movie, en route to the objective, and we're going to get the plan."

Then Carstens got all DIY. Using a couple of cell phones and some colorfully wrapped Ghirardelli chocolates as placeholders for planes and people, he walked through the mechanics and potential pitfalls. "For all we know it won't be a perfect world and they'll land like this," he gestured in a way that put the Venezuelan planes behind his own. "So, if we don't have visual out of both sides of the windows, just keep adapting."

AT HOME IN Winter Garden, Florida, Tania Valdes was worried sick about her son, Osman Khan. "His health was getting worse," she recalled, dabbing her eyes. "He was having seizures more often and he was rushed to the hospital several times." She had sent Carstens an urgent email. "I told him that I was afraid that my son would not make it home if they didn't act quickly."

"OUR ADVERSARIES KNOW THAT THIS IS A GUY WHO COULD ROLL UP A NEWSPAPER AND KILL YOU WITH IT. BUT AT THE SAME TIME, LIKE MOST GREEN BERETS I'VE MET, HE GETS ALONG WITH PEOPLE."

In hindsight, Khan's odyssey from the University of Central Florida to a cell in Caracas had the twists of a spy thriller run through Franz Kafka's typewriter. When he graduated in the spring of 2021, COVID restrictions were still in force, so he began working remotely—from Colombia. One evening he was out at a nightclub when he met an 18-year-old



waitress. Khan relentlessly pursued her, and they soon became an item. "I heard of his girlfriend, Rosa, in December of 2021," his sister Jasmin recalled. "He said that she was a very good person, very caring, very loving." (Rosa is a pseudonym meant to protect her identity.)

The couple moved in together, and on New Year's Eve 2022, Rosa's father paid a visit. By several accounts, he encouraged the young American to do the honorable thing: visit Venezuela and formally introduce himself to Rosa's family. Had Khan presented the plan to his own family, it is unlikely he would have made the trek. "I know it's not safe," his mother said. "The regime that they have in Venezuela is similar to the one we had in Cuba. So, I absolutely wouldn't have approved of him going." His sister was more blunt: "I would have put handcuffs on him."

Khan posed some obvious questions: Do I need a visa? How will we get there? Is it safe? The answers, according to two sources, did not come from Rosa or her father but rather from her brother, Johnny, a captain in the Bolivarian National Guard of Venezuela, who was apparently tight enough with the regime to have served as a bodyguard for the defense minister. Johnny advised Khan that he was welcome to enter without a visa and was exacting about where to cross: Instead of Cucuta, a well-trafficked border town, Johnny recommended, so Khan would tell relatives, that they traverse the Arauca River from a faraway village, a trip that required a nausea-inducing overnight bus ride.

When they finally arrived, Khan and Rosa joined her father and boarded a decrepit motorized canoe. If Khan was worried, it doesn't show in the video he shot that day, footage that captured him smiling and laughing as he crossed into a country that had been under withering US sanctions for years.

As the three disembarked, one of their fellow passengers guided them to a taxi that he appeared to own and started driving. Fifteen minutes later, at a military checkpoint, the vehicle was pulled out of line. At first it appeared to be a shakedown: Guards gathered around and rifled through their belongings. That is until Khan was asked to pull out his passport. All hell broke loose. "He's a gringo! He's a gringo!" shouted gun-toting men, according to multiple accounts of the incident.

Khan was held for three days in a ramshackle dwelling that reeked of human waste. "When I arrive at the house, they take my handcuffs off and I enter, and I don't know what is going on," Khan would later recount to Heath and others. "A really big guy comes up to me and he's like, 'So you think you're a tough guy' and punches me right in the face. I get knocked to the ground. I get thrown onto this gurney and they strap me down. They cover my face and they start drowning me. I was screaming, and I would just hear laughing. They were waterboarding me."

His captors—convinced he was an American spy—took him to another room where, he said, they stripped him naked. "One of the guys starts pricking me with something. I was screaming and then I started feeling needles going through my body. They started electrocuting me. I fell to the ground, and I started throwing up. And the guys start making fun of me and they forced me to eat my own vomit."

Soon he was shoved onto a military plane, flown to Caracas, and taken to the House of Dreams, where he was placed in isolation. Only after he smashed a mirror and tried to cut himself did the guards relent ever so slightly. They opened a slot in his cell door, which allowed him to peer into the corridor and communicate with Matthew Heath and Eyvin Hernandez.

ON JANUARY 17, 2022, Khan's sister received a frantic call from their mother. "She was like, 'Jasmin, I got this voice recording and I need you to listen to it,'" she remembered. "I hear Osman. He's like, 'Mom, I need something.' And then it cuts out. And I remember immediately thinking, My brother is being held hostage."

Within hours, the Khans turned their dining room into a command post as family and friends took out their laptops and

ALL: VICTOR TADASHI SUAREZ



tried to reconstruct what had happened. Cross-referencing phone numbers with various social media profiles, they identified some of the individuals who were initially holding Khan: They were members of the same outfit to which Rosa's brother, Johnny, belonged. The family tried to reach American officials. But since the US had suspended diplomatic operations in Caracas in March 2019, responsibility for American citizens in the country had fallen to a unit stationed at the US embassy in neighboring Bogotá, Colombia.

The Khans, like other families whose loved ones are taken, were eager for Carstens and his 25-member SPEHA team to take up Osman's case. That, however, required a formal designation by the secretary of state—based on 11 criteria set forth in the Levinson Act—establishing that the person in question had in fact been detained illegally or under false pretenses. In high-profile cases like that of the *Journal*'s Gershkovich, that process took two weeks. For Khan, it took six months.

The administration is sensitive to allegations of disparate treatment. "I know it can be opaque and confusing to people, but these are often not static stories that are frozen in time," Blinken argued. "We learn more about the circumstances of someone's detention as time goes on. We see how a particular case evolves and that is what may in some instances cross the line from [a lawful] arrest to an arbitrary detention."

ENSEMBLE CAST

Secretary of State Antony Blinken; released American hostages Matthew Heath and Osman Khan; then National Security Council senior director Juan Gonzalez; Pedro Martinez (father of former detainee Eyvin Hernandez); and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

When Carstens took over in 2020, he and his chief of staff, Carolee Walker, radically restructured the way families were treated and settled on an unconventional approach. Now, when Americans are "designated," Carstens and his team fly out to visit their families in their homes. They sit with them. They dine, drink, and cry with them. Before they leave, the families have Carstens's cell phone number and are encouraged to call him and his staff at any hour of the day—and often do.

Relatives can also visit the team on the sixth floor of the State Department, where a sitting room, adorned with a single white orchid on a small table, is reserved for heart-to-heart sessions. To ensure that the group's mission is front of mind, the hallways are lined with pictures of current and former hostages, making it impossible for the staff to get to their offices without encountering their successes—and their failures. Another area is dominated by a panel of digital clocks denoting the times in locations where Americans are at risk. During one of my visits, they read: Bamako, Damascus, Tehran, Pyongyang.

While the success of a prestige unit like Carstens's can breed envy and resentment among counterparts in other offices and agencies, his coterie is generally given a wide berth. That's because other stakeholders seem to dread the strain and drain that come from constant interaction with distraught family members. One frequent refrain in these circles: "Let's let Roger's folks handle that."

Team SPEHA spends lots of time brainstorming, playing the angles. They vent collectively and console one another when the chance for a release goes up in smoke or when a detainee's family calls—yelling or sobbing—and says they aren't working fast enough or being sufficiently creative. "Every day I have a Starbucks coffee at my desk and I'm wearing a suit and tie, I'm thinking, This is total bullshit," Carstens said about certain facets of the gig. "If this job turned into what it should be, we would be forward in a full-time negotiation, drinking Red Bull, popping Adderall until the job gets done." Clearly, the soldier in him can be at odds with diplomacy's demands. At moments like these, he said, he catches himself and realizes, "I'm exactly where I need to be. There's someone in a prison waiting for me to get this done and get them out."

"In a very polarized country," O'Brien told me, "bringing American hostages home is one of the things that pulls people



HOMEWARD BOUND
Carstens and team reunite with US hostages Khan and Heath on the island of Canouan, 2022.

together." In his experience, the public is captivated by the phenomenon. "I think it's one of those 'There but for the grace of God, that could be me.'"

Jake Sullivan, who assumed O'Brien's position at the White House when Biden took office, professed a similar view. "On a day-to-day basis, we're dealing with big structural issues of historic sweep," he said, ticking off examples such as climate change, the war in Ukraine, nuclear proliferation.

"Trying to resolve cases of individual people and their families is an entirely different kettle of fish. It is about strategy and diplomacy, for sure. But it's mostly about trying to deliver—at a very human level—a result in which you are bringing home somebody and reuniting them with their loved ones. That is not wholesale. That is retail. It's as retail as it gets."

WHEN THE PLANE door closed in Caracas, Heath and Khan realized that Hernandez had been left behind in the House of Dreams. After six months in Venezuelan custody, the public defender had yet to be labeled by the State Department as wrongfully detained, and therefore he was not part of the exchange. Heath and Khan felt enormous survivor's guilt.

Upon landing 90 minutes later, Heath worried that, given the flight's short duration, they may have only gone as far as Cuba. "All the Citgo guys were yelling and they were so happy," he recalled. "I remember telling Osman, 'We still have time for this to go bad because they didn't turn off the engines. Flip a switch or take off the brakes, and that plane rolls right back out to the runway and we go back to Venezuela.'"

His suspicions were understandable. During takeoff, the senior Venezuelan official whom Heath describes as his main torturer had been stationed by the plane's exit with a handgun tucked into his waistband. Ever eager to keep his captors off-balance, Heath started the day by threatening to remain a hostage rather than participate in any exchange in which his nemesis had a role. His outburst—part legitimate grievance, part psyops bluster—evidently prompted his tormentor to make himself scarce in a bid to defuse the situation. Yet once Heath and the other Americans were on board, with their hands and feet bound, the senior prison official reappeared.

Out on the tarmac, the US delegation followed the tabletop plan they had rehearsed. Carstens met and conferred with the head of Venezuela's National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez, a psychiatrist turned politician. He is Maduro's fixer, entrusted to engage with avowed enemies like the United States. Wearing a baseball cap and dark glasses, he looked like he was trying hard not to be recognized—or photographed.

Carstens invited Rodríguez onto the US plane, he recounted. "He had a chance, quickly, to talk with the nephews, make sure that they were okay." Rodríguez then returned the courtesy. "When I popped on the plane, they all recognized me," Carstens added. "They all broke out in cheers and screams and shouts of joy. For my part, I wanted to be there with them in spirit, but I still had to count seven people and make sure the math was right. I remember getting up to Matthew Heath, and I think even at that point I could tell he was still looking for a fight." Carstens turned to the steely Marine and said, "Hey, Matthew, bringing the heat!"

Shortly thereafter, the swap commenced. US marshals unshackled the two Venezuelans and sent them forward. Then the main guard, as Heath recalled, began barking instructions: "'Walk off the plane, walk straight to the other plane. Don't run, don't deviate to the left or the right. Walk slowly, do not stop.' My fear was like, What if they try to snatch us? What if they try to screw this deal up?"

As seven Americans took their first steps toward freedom, Carstens embraced the moment. "I can't tell you," he said, "how special it was for me personally just to physically touch someone who was coming off a plane and tell them that it's almost over." No one needed that more than Khan. As he shuffled toward Carstens, footage captured of the exchange shows him in a catatonic state. He was no longer in the House of Dreams, but he was not out of danger.

SULLIVAN DESCRIBED THE atmosphere at the White House as upbeat but steeped in uncertainty: "It was 99.9 percent great. And then you're like, Okay, but we will not fully feel like the mission is complete until their feet are planted on American soil." He went to see his boss. "Most of the time we're in there briefing the president on threats and challenges, on things that require very hard decisions. It's not that often you get to walk into the Oval Office and say, 'Mr. President, you have the opportunity now to give seven families really good news.'"

The hostage families had dialed into a conference call, thinking they were receiving an update from Sullivan, when

US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Biden came on the line. "We've secured the release of each of your loved ones," he began. "They've been through a lot, and we've been working like the devil to make sure that this happens. They're all safe—all seven of them, and they are now in the custody and care of the US government." Sullivan recalled the reaction. "Through the speakerphone in the Oval Office, we could just hear some combination of relief and joy and release and that was an incredibly human, poignant moment, and it's the kind of thing that really sticks with you. In a job that has a lot of tough days, that was a very good day."

Over the Caribbean, the scene was less euphoric. "Osman Khan had three physical seizures—I'd say two of them were quite bad," remembered Carstens, who accompanied the young man on the G-III with an ICU. "What was going through my mind was, We have a medical team here. We're going to get through this. But the other part that I had to reflect on is: What got him to this state? What happened to him during his time in a prison in Venezuela that caused these seizures?"

Heath, too, was aboard the G-III, which was racing toward Kelly Field at Joint Base San Antonio, where American hostages are typically brought and put through a Pentagon program created to treat and reintegrate prisoners of war. "I'm worried about Osman," Heath said. "I don't know what's going on—maybe he could die." Heath held Khan's hand and psychologist Young Hoang rubbed his chest while medics pushed intravenous medications into his system.

I was at the base in Texas when word came that a medical emergency had been declared in flight. The recovery mission was so tightly compartmentalized that those around me were scrambling. "Maybe 15 people in the whole US government knew that this was about to happen," Carstens would later recollect. "So, imagine if you're in the Department of Defense and you're getting a call from your buddies at the State Department warning that in the next few hours seven people are going to be coming in hot from a jail cell in Caracas, some of them with some pretty tough medical situations—and we need help."

The G-V landed shortly after 8 p.m. Four of the Citgo executives disembarked and walked toward a hangar where dozens of family members had gathered. As I observed the encounter, something both remarkable and disquieting happened: The men came to a halt only a few feet from their loved ones. Conditioned by years behind bars, they appeared to wait for permission to cross an invisible barrier. Then a voice shouted "Go! Go!" and, as though a dam broke, the two sides flooded toward each other. The raw emotion of spouses, children, and grandchildren reuniting was overpowering.

Still, the joy of freedom was tempered by the wreckage that captivity had wrought. The G-III landed 15 minutes later, and Carstens, Heath, and a fifth Citgo exec climbed off. Medical personnel then carried Khan down the jet's stairs on a stretcher. Months later I showed him footage of that evening. "I don't even recognize myself," he remarked. "I can tell I'm out of it—I don't even look like I'm cognitively there."

With great interest and emotion, he watched a video I had captured of Carstens addressing the seven returnees. "On behalf of President Biden and the secretary of state, welcome home," he began. Cheers broke out. After thanking the families for their tireless work in holding the government accountable, Carstens turned to the newly freed men. "I've been so inspired and impressed by how resilient you've been, how strong you've been. And this is key: None of you ever lost faith in your country. You knew that at one point we were going to come and get you." The cheers grew louder.

PART TWO

Under overcast skies, Carstens steered a white Buick rental through the streets of Compton, California, checking his GPS for the home of Henry Martinez, a tattoo artist whose life had been upended when his brother, Eyvin Hernandez, disappeared in March 2022 while on vacation in Colombia—where he had gone to take a break from his day job as an LA public defender.

For his first 10 days in-country, Hernandez had texted and called his family daily. Then he went dark. "We let it slide for a day," Martinez recalled. "Then the second day came. Maybe his phone's dead." Soon he tried reaching hospitals in Medellín. When that failed, he rang the US embassy in Bogotá, passing along details about the Airbnb his brother had booked. The Colombian police followed up, and a camera phone was rolling as they entered the dwelling. "When they're walking into that door," Martinez choked up, describing what was running through his head as he watched the video. "The worst of the worst—thinking, you know, they'll find a body. And there was no one there."

"We had heard rumors of an American who might have gone missing around the border region of Colombia and Venezuela," Carstens recalled. "I went to see Matthew Heath and Osman Khan and,

WE LANDED AT A SECLUDED AIRSTRIP ON THE ISLAND OF CANOUAN, THE VERDANT NO-MAN'S-LAND WHERE "BILLIONAIRES GO TO ESCAPE MILLIONAIRES"—AND SENIOR VENEZUELAN OFFICIALS CAN VISIT WITHOUT FEAR OF ARREST.

October 1, 2022, represented the largest release of US hostages in four decades. But the glow of that day quickly faded, and worry set in: Could the US hostage enterprise repeat the feat and find a way to gain the release of Hernandez—and the dozens of others still held elsewhere in unforgiving conditions?

typically, the Venezuelans will just parade every American that they have in custody and put them in a room with me and let me kind of sort things out. And in one of those meetings, Eyvin Hernandez showed up."

Hernandez, a seasoned lawyer, gave a rapid-fire summation of how he wound up in the House of Dreams. Carstens

scribbled furiously in a Moleskine notebook as Hernandez recounted how, during his vacation in Colombia, he had met a Venezuelan woman who asked him to accompany her across the border into her home country to sort out a passport issue. After he and the woman traversed a bridge, armed men demanded his papers and soon hauled him away. Like Khan, he was held locally before being turned over to military intelligence in Caracas.

As Carstens entered Martinez's house in Compton, he was received warmly, hugs and all, by a living room full of Hernandez's family, friends, and colleagues in the legal profession. It was clear, though, that the attorney's imprisonment had devastated his loved ones—emotionally and financially—and infuriated his coworkers. "He's somebody who will use every tool available to defend his clients," said Drew Havens, a public defender whom Hernandez had mentored. "Now he's in a situation in Venezuela where he doesn't have any remedies available to him. And he has told me that it's incredibly demoralizing for him just knowing that the values that he's dedicated his life to don't apply in his current situation." (Depending on the guards' moods, prisoners in the House of Dreams are allowed to phone home a few times a month. They can only speak in Spanish, and their conversations are monitored by Venezuelan agents.)

Havens, who sat in on the meeting with Carstens, expressed the belief that there was a solution to his colleague's predicament: "The Maduro regime wants Alex Saab. If Alex Saab were to be released, I'm confident that Eyvin would have been home yesterday."

Alex Nain Saab Morán is not a household name, but the Colombian-born businessman has routinely been described as a pivotal figure in helping Venezuela evade sanctions. The US indicted him in 2019 on money-laundering charges and in June 2020 he was detained in Cape Verde during a refueling stop on his way to Iran. O'Brien—Carstens's and Sullivan's predecessor—told me that he and other Trump administration officials were so concerned that operatives from Venezuela or one of its allies would try to spring Saab from custody that they stationed US vessels in the waters off the tiny West African island nation. Sixteen months later, the Biden Justice Department would extradite Saab to Miami.

"Within Venezuela, and obviously with the guidance of Nicolás Maduro, Alex Saab was labeled a freedom fighter," explained Mickey Bergman, an associate of the late Bill Richardson, the New Mexico governor and UN ambassador. An early practitioner of what insiders call fringe diplomacy in regions that can be averse to American diplomats and interests, Bergman has been one of the more active nongovernmental facilitators working to free Americans.

Bergman shared the larger backstory about Venezuela's repeated abductions. He argued that Saab's arrest and continued confinement had invited significant blowback. "Alex Saab gets extradited in October of 2021," Bergman said. That same day, the Citgo employees "get sent back to prison from house arrest. And months later, Osman Khan gets arrested and detained, and Eyvin Hernandez gets arrested and detained. Especially if the Venezuelans' narrative is that Alex Saab is a political prisoner wrongfully detained in the United States, you can see how there's a buildup there."

US officials had consistently told the captives' families that trading Saab was a nonstarter on the grounds that he had yet to be tried. Federal prosecutors also argued, in pleadings unsealed by a judge in Miami, that the businessman's life might be at risk if he were to return to Caracas. The reason? Saab, they say, had been a confidential DEA informant who, as part of his agreement to surrender to US authorities, provided details about bribes and sanction-busting crimes he committed in the US and Venezuela. Maduro's reputed bagman, however, failed to surrender as promised in 2019, prompting his opportunistic arrest the following year.

While the prospect of swapping Saab was unpalatable, it was not without precedent. Only weeks before visiting Hernandez's family, Carstens, along with David Cotter, the NSC's director for hostage and detainee affairs, had flown Viktor Bout, a notorious arms dealer (and inspiration for the film *Lord of War*), to an airfield in Abu Dhabi for the high-profile exchange for Brittney Griner. And eight months before that, Carstens and cohorts took part in the swap of Konstantin Yaroshenko—a Russian pilot and drug trafficker—for Trevor Reed, a Marine Corps veteran who had been arrested in Moscow for allegedly assaulting a police officer. (Reed has denied the charges.)

Still, addressing the group in the Martinez living room in Compton, Carstens focused on the art of the possible. "I need to start finding other options that are not Saab-related," he confided. "One of the reasons that we go down to Caracas is: I want to sit *this* close to Jorge Rodríguez and *this* close to President Maduro and just throw it out there, like 'Okay, well, this option is no longer available. How are we going to solve this?'"

"I still believe so much in you," said Hernandez's father, Pedro Martinez, as the meeting drew to a close. "And I know you're going to bring him here." Both men wiped away tears before Carstens vowed, "We will bring him home."

"IT'S NOT THAT OFTEN YOU GET TO WALK INTO THE OVAL OFFICE AND SAY, 'MR. PRESIDENT, YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY NOW TO GIVE SEVEN FAMILIES REALLY GOOD NEWS.'"

ON A DREARY evening a few weeks later, a crowd gathered for a candlelight vigil outside Hernandez's alma mater, UCLA Law School. Grammy nominee Aloe Blacc sang a stirring rendition of Donny Hathaway's 1973 anthem "Someday We'll All Be Free."

One speaker, though unknown to the crowd, was impossible to ignore. "I was locked up with Eyvin in Venezuela. My name is Osman Khan." With welling eyes, he continued, "When I got on that plane and I saw that he wasn't going to be with me, it hurt and it still hurts," he said, struggling to keep it together. "When I had



FREE AT LAST
Detainees, after long ordeals in custody, join their families in San Antonio, 2022.

ADAM CIRALSKY

my convulsions due to my torture, Eyvin always stood there for me. And just the same way he had my back, we all need to have his back.... Thank you all. And bring Eyvin home!" At that, those assembled started chanting "Bring Eyvin home."

Heath, while lending his voice to the campaign for the public defender's release, was still bringing the heat. "They're sadists with no oversight," he said of the Venezuelan intelligence service. "They electrocuted me. They asphyxiated me—put a plastic bag on my head. Forced nudity. A *lot* of beatings." He showed me the scars where he sliced his forearm and wondered aloud how Hernandez was coping. "He's tough. But it's hard on him. He's alone. He's distressed. He needs help."

What Heath and Khan did not know were the other intense efforts underway. "We're absolutely determined to bring him home," Blinken said when we spoke about Hernandez at the time. "I'm confident that we'll get there. The challenge is that the other side gets a vote, and you can be going down one track and it looks promising, and all of a sudden, they decide to move the goalposts, and you have to adjust." He was not kidding.

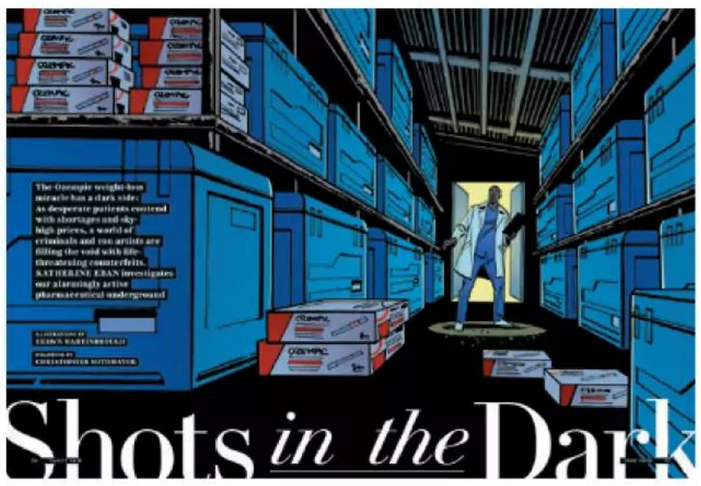
IN LESS THAN a year, Carstens and his associates had pried seven hostages loose from Venezuela. They had worked with various intermediaries to trade Russia's so-called merchant of death for a basketball star, helped gain the release of a Navy veteran named Mark Frerichs from Afghanistan, and assisted in the recovery of five Americans from Iran. Still, the man I had known for 15 years seemed as though he was suspended in a kind of purgatory: haunted and hailed.

During a ceremony at Fort Bragg, Carstens was inducted as a distinguished member of the Special Forces regiment. Weeks later, at a Washington gala thrown by the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, he was bestowed with the Robert A. Levinson excellence in government service award. Yet in some weird, almost cosmic way, it felt as though the hostages were ever-present. On the night of the black-tie Foley event, as Carstens sat with his family up near the podium, Henry Martinez, seated across the room, received a call from his brother inside the House of Dreams. Martinez excused himself and walked with Hernandez's colleague Drew Havens to the lobby of the National Press Club.

"We're in DC, we're fighting for you, man," Havens told his mentor over speakerphone, trying to accentuate the positive. Martinez took a dimmer view of their progress with Washington officialdom, a wide swath of which was seated in the ballroom nearby: "We're talking to some people—about to smack some motherfuckers upside their head so they can act up and shit." Hernandez admitted, "Man, I'm fucking tired of being here—13 months." At that, Martinez softened. "Just keep the faith. We're pushing the right buttons. It's just all this fucking bureaucracy. You'll be home soon." The hostage, evidently hearing the tension in his brother's voice, tried to buck him up. "Just to make things a little bit lighter, what happened in the NFL draft?"

TWO WEEKS LATER, I boarded a government jet with Carstens bound for Canouan, the hard-to-reach island where the previous prisoner swap had unfolded. Dubbed the place where "billionaires go to escape millionaires," it is a verdant no-man's-land where senior Venezuelan officials—several of whom have been indicted and sanctioned by the West—can visit without fear of arrest.

"I don't think any other country would spend this much time, money, or effort to bring its citizens home," Carstens mused before adding that those on the other side of the negotiating table are often at a loss to explain America's devotion to freeing its own. "I have these really strange conversations where I'm trying to convey that it's part of our ethos. My nation actually cares about the individual and that the reason we're there bargaining is because CONTINUED ON PAGE 104



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65 had come for a series of meetings with Chinese officials on the deepening of business ties between the two countries.

The impetus for these meetings was an urgent one.

In China, Novo Nordisk was locked in a legal battle to maintain its patent for semaglutide; a loss of intellectual property protection there could potentially open up a geyser of sophisticated knockoffs.

In June 2021, the Hangzhou Zhongmei Huadong pharmaceutical company had applied to invalidate Novo Nordisk's patent for semaglutide, which had been approved in China five years earlier. In 2022, the Chinese company's motion was granted. Just like that, Novo Nordisk's patent went up in smoke—at least temporarily.

In China, pharmaceutical patents are "an endangered species" and the decision was "not that unusual," says a lawyer expert in Chinese pharmaceutical patent law. Nevertheless, it was a major setback for Novo Nordisk. Before long, more than 10 different companies had applied to China's Center for Drug Evaluation to manufacture semaglutide. Novo Nordisk appealed to the Beijing Intellectual Property Court.

The charm offensive last August, as the case was pending, appears to have had some effect. In November 2023, in a highly unusual move, the property court fully restored the Ozempic patent. Hangzhou Zhongmei Huadong has appealed the decision to China's Supreme People's Court, but as of last November, Novo Nordisk's intellectual property appeared to be safe in China.

Novo Nordisk declined to comment on the ongoing litigation.

JUSTIN FIALA, MD, was on duty at the intensive care unit of Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago the week before Christmas when the first patient turned up. They had clammy skin, slurred speech, and seemed confused. According to a family member, the patient had gotten an Ozempic pen from a nurse in Oklahoma who was the friend of a friend. Upon examination, it turned out that the patient's glucose levels were dangerously low.

Several days later, Fiala recalls, two more patients were admitted to the ICU. They had injected Ozempic pens they'd gotten at a Botox party after a day of drinking. Within minutes of the injection, one had suffered seizures and lost consciousness. "Alcohol really complicates glucose control," says Fiala.

All three patients were fishing for a weight-loss solution in a sea of risks they didn't fully understand.

The hospital reported the incidents to the Illinois Poison Center, which turned over the pens for analysis to the FDA's office of criminal investigations, says Wahl, the center's medical director.

What had these patients, all nondiabetics, actually injected? The medical residents on duty did some online sleuthing and stumbled across the likely culprit, says Fiala. The Apidra SoloStar insulin pen, made by Sanofi, offers immediate results that can be lifesaving for diabetics but deadly if injected by nondiabetics. The pen is a darkish gray blue, close enough to the Ozempic pen's brighter blue to be relabeled and passed off as authentic.

The exploitation of that passing resemblance by counterfeiters is "super worrying," says Novo Nordisk product security director Devaud. She says her team and their counterparts at Sanofi, where she used to work, are pooling intelligence and cooperating on cases where switched products are suspected.

A Sanofi spokesperson says the company is "aware of some falsified Ozempic... originating from illegal mislabeling of Apidra" pens and is "collaborating with stakeholders to protect patients."

IT'S OBVIOUS THAT out-and-out counterfeits are extremely dangerous. A less obvious risk arises from the proliferation of "compounded" versions of GLP-1 drugs of uneven quality.

State-licensed compounders create custom-made medicines for patients with allergies or other special needs. They serve as an important stopgap in the US drug supply, and are allowed to make small amounts of commercially available medicines that are in short supply under certain conditions. But their products, though legal, don't undergo the same testing and scrutiny as FDA-approved drugs.

In 2022, the FDA placed both Ozempic and Wegovy on its shortage list, enabling compounders to ramp up production. The result has been a quality control disaster. Some compounders are seeking out active ingredients from unregistered foreign sources who evade customs review by shipping their wares inside cat food bags or rolled-up rugs, says an attorney and former FDA official with expertise in compounding.

Both Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly have found dangerous impurities in compounded versions of their drugs. In an open letter to patients on January 4, Eli Lilly warned that it had "discovered products claiming to be compounded tirzepatide medicines that contain bacteria, high impurity levels, different chemical structures, and different colors than Mounjaro or Zepbound. In at least one instance, the product was nothing more than sugar alcohol." (Tirzepatide is the active ingredient in Mounjaro and Zepbound.)

One sample of compounded semaglutide sold by a Florida pharmacy contained "33% unknown impurities" that likely resulted from the use of non-pharmaceutical-grade semaglutide, according to a lawsuit Novo Nordisk filed last November.

Between February 2019 and December 2023, 352 reports of adverse events from compounded GLP-1 drugs rolled into the FDA, most submitted by patients and health care providers. Four people died, and many others suffered life-threatening reactions. One woman, who had obesity but was otherwise healthy, died suddenly from blood clots the day after injecting a dose of compounded semaglutide. The report submitted to the FDA says that a nurse practitioner felt the death was "possibly related" to the use of compounded semaglutide, due to the "proximity of product use."

In January, the FDA warned consumers about reports of adverse events linked to compounded semaglutide and said some such products contained a variant of the peptide, semaglutide sodium, that had not been proven safe or effective.

Scott Brunner, CEO of the Alliance for Pharmacy Compounding, says the criticism of compounding is due to "misplaced anxiety" and a fundamental misunderstanding of what pharmacy compounders do. They can only purchase active ingredients from FDA-approved sources that are accompanied by a valid certificate of

analysis, and they can only sell to patients who present a doctor's prescription.

In their critiques, the brand-name companies are conflating state-licensed compounding with illegal online pharmacies that sell "an illicit substance that you buy without a prescription. That's not even pharmacy," Brunner says. "That's drug dealing."

But John Hertig, associate professor at Butler University's College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, says that some compounders are illegally sourcing ingredients from the gray or black market, resulting in products that "at worst will harm or kill you," he says. "Not every pharmacy compounder is equal in adherence to the law."

DOWN A BLEAK network of access roads off John F. Kennedy Airport in Queens, New York, sits the US Postal Service's International Mail Facility. It's an eerie place, with interlocking warehouses the size of football fields containing the remnants of a conveyor belt system from the 1970s. Overhead, pigeons flap around, searching for an exit.

One million parcels from overseas land at this facility every day, making it the nation's busiest port of entry. An overhaul is planned so that, one day, AI-powered robots will sort the illegal shipments from the legit ones and the fake from the real. But for now, the effort to stem the tide of counterfeits falls to an overwhelmed assemblage of federal agents from Customs and Border Protection, the National Intellectual Property Rights Coordination Center, the FDA, the Department of Agriculture, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and other agencies.

While they are guided by data and intelligence, they are also using hunt-and-peck methods to intercept what amounts to the work product of some of the world's most ruthless profiteers. First, there are the illegally smuggled goods, like the live finches sold by gambling rings that bet on which birds sing loudest and longest.

Then there are the counterfeits of varying lethality: cigarettes containing rat feces; phony makeup laced with cyanide and lead; bogus car airbags that either fail to inflate on impact or contain shrapnel and explode. "They don't care if you die," explains Steven Nethersole, a Customs and Border Protection officer, as he shows me some recently seized goods.

From the 100 fake Rolexes packed in bubble wrap to the Christian Louboutin knockoffs that arrived in a dilapidated box, there's usually a tell. On a table in front of Nethersole, there's a "Coach" handbag with a "Michael Kors" zipper and a designer coat with a label that reads "Burbelly."

Next to that is a table piled with small boxes of intercepted Ozempic, many of the shipping labels stamped "medication for personal use." Though it's illegal to import medicine from overseas, Americans are permitted in certain circumstances to order small amounts of drugs that are unavailable in the US.

Those small exemptions translate into a tsunami of imported medicine. Each one of the orders on the table will have to be "scrutinized," says Andrew Solarsh, a CBP supervisory officer.

Approximately 60 percent of the counterfeits coming through JFK originate in China, some of them routed through Turkey, Thailand, or the Netherlands, Solarsh explains. The biggest obstacle to intercepting them is the sheer volume.

The USPS and other entities operate hubs like this one at JFK and other ports of entry, and the counterfeit Ozempic in lot NAR0074 likely passed through it or a similar facility. The boxes were accompanied by paperwork, obtained by *VF,* that intermingles real and fake information: shipping and export records, a packaging manifest, and product tracing data.

According to an air waybill, the Ozempic pens were shipped on China Airlines from Shenzhen, China, on November 10. They were shipped by an entity calling itself the Shenzhen Lisheng Import & Export Trading Company to "New York, JFK." The waybill number corresponds to a package that arrived at JFK on the evening of November 12, 2023. The separate packaging manifest shows that 10,000 units were transported in cold storage by a third-party shipper, PIF Global Logistics, and had been purchased with a bank transfer for $2 million. At $200 for a monthly pen containing four doses, that's about one fifth of what a patient might pay out of pocket at a drugstore. (PIF Global did not respond to a request for comment. Shenzhen Lisheng could not be reached for comment.)

According to the packaging manifest, the pens were manufactured at a Novo Nordisk China facility in the northeastern city of Tianjin. The manifest carries the trademark Apis bull logo balancing the sun between its horns, along with the name of a Novo Nordisk sign-off manager: Desheng Wang.

Except Novo Nordisk doesn't supply the US market with Ozempic manufactured in China. As a company spokesperson explains, "Most products in the US are made at US manufacturing sites, and some products are received from Novo Nordisk sites in Europe." And no one named Desheng Wang—a common name in China—is employed by Novo Nordisk in any country, the spokesperson says. In other words, some of the data on the packaging manifest is as fake as the product itself.

The export certificate, stamped in Shenzhen on September 25, 2023, appears to be authentic. It identifies the cargo as Ozempic from lot NAR0074, but it lists a product code for leather items such as handbags, which may have enabled the shipment to slip past Customs. When the FDA briefed Congress on its investigation, it said at least some of the counterfeit product had been smuggled illegally into the US through ports of entry, according to a source familiar with the proceedings.

Who actually counterfeited the Ozempic pens remains unclear. But the sales date listed on the packaging manifest—August 10, 2023, a few days before Novo Nordisk's CEO arrived in China—raises the possibility that the pens, which contained real semaglutide, though not the exact dose, could have been manufactured during the period when Ozempic's patent protection there had been paused.

Asked about this possibility, the Novo Nordisk spokesperson said, "We cannot speculate on whether the [patent] invalidation has had a causal relationship of counterfeit products given the complexity of this case."

As Novo Nordisk scrambles to ramp up its worldwide supply of Ozempic and Wegovy, purchasing manufacturing plants to expand production, it is also under pressure to reduce the medications' explosive costs. A recent study found that GLP-1 drugs could be manufactured for less than $5 a month. While a price reduction would help many more patients access the drug, it could have an additional benefit of making the drugs a less attractive target for counterfeiters.

The question of how at least 10,000 units of counterfeit Ozempic entered America's drug supply, bearing fake repetitive serial numbers, undetected by authorities including the FDA, is still being unraveled. But for Dennis Moore at Hudson Scientific, the takeaway is simple: "The system failed. That's the key piece." ■

Additional reporting by Beril Eski and Katherine Li. Additional research by Stan Friedman.

Magical Thinking



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 81 *Harry Potter* when a ghost shows up and there's a halo and the music goes up." That answers the magical realism question: Netflix isn't interested in flashy (and expensive) special effects.

The directing is split between two Latin Americans. García López was born in Argentina and has ample experience working on big American productions, including a few Marvel series. The other director is Colombian-born writer-director Laura Mora, who has a long-standing relationship with Netflix and whose films, *The Kings of the World* and *Killing Jesus,* have earned festival acclaim. The directors' styles couldn't be more different. García López is vertiginous—"I wanted a lot of movement, I wanted to capture the chaos"—where Mora is contemplative: "I'm a cinema purist." García López shoots from above; Mora from a more intimate perspective. García López mentions Kusturica and Terrence Malick. Mora references Fellini and Lucrecia Martel. "I think they chose us because we are so different," says Mora on a video call from her native Medellín, "and because we are a good complement."

They also reflect the two different histories within the novel. *One Hundred Years* offers a metaphorical history of civilization in the largest sense, as well as the more specific story of Colombia and the Caribbean. The book never actually mentions dates and it plays with time. This adaptation—conceived by José Rivera, the Oscar-nominated screenwriter of *The Motorcycle Diaries*—is linear and closely pegged to what happened in Colombia between 1850 and 1950. García López, perhaps because he is not Colombian, sees the universal message about the failure of societies. Mora highlights the tragedy of Colombia and the country's inability to find a way to live together after a century of violence. Both directors are quick to point out that their adaptation will be as demanding as the novel. "It is not light entertainment," says Mora, who compares it to the tone and scope of *Killers of the Flower Moon.* "It deals with big, strong themes. A complex universe."

Filming the series, particularly in Colombia, has meant doing justice to a work of art held up as a symbol of patriotic pride. Vásquez, who plays the older José Arcadio Buendía, gets so moved at times that he cries on set. He can't believe that life has given him the opportunity to play such an emblematic character, even though he spends much of his time tied to a tree.

During production in Colombia, García López says he continually heard: This is so important to us, this story is so Colombian. "I would go, 'Yes, but once a book sells 50 million copies worldwide, it becomes a global phenomenon. It doesn't belong to you anymore. It belongs to humanity.'"

IT IS FOUR in the afternoon and the Caribbean sun is easing when I meet Gabriel Eligio Torres García, Gabo's nephew, in the Parque de Bolívar, one of colonial Cartagena's main squares. Gabo Gabo, as he is known, gives walking tours of the spots where his uncle used to hang out. He integrates both fictional characters and real places that Gabo mentions in his novels, especially *Love in the Time of Cholera,* which is mostly set in a city inspired by this walled port.

Gabo Gabo (a nickname given to him by his famous uncle to distinguish him from the other three Gabriels in his family) greets me with typical Caribbean warmth, as if we have known each other all our lives. He points to the park bench where he was sitting and tells me Gabo spent his first night in Cartagena right there. It was 1948. He had dropped out of law school in Bogotá, deciding that he would rebel against his parent's expectations and dedicate his life to writing. "He didn't go home to where his parents lived because he knew his mother would be able to figure it out just by looking at him." He lied and said he would enroll in Cartagena's law school and convinced a relative to bring him the money he needed for a room. "In the meantime," Gabo Gabo says, "he would wait and sleep here, until two cops came by, smoked all his cigarettes, and took him to the police precinct."

Thanks to a recommendation from a friend, Gabo was hired to write editorials at *El Universal,* my guide tells me as we pass the dilapidated building that used to house the newspaper. At 21, Gabo walked through the arches known as the Clock Tower and realized that Cartagena would become his home in the Caribbean. Gabo Gabo quotes his uncle's memoir, *Living to Tell the Tale:* "I could not repress the feeling of having been born again."

In his late 60s, Gabo bought an old yarn factory that faced the sea and hired Rogelio Salmona, Colombia's premier architect, to build his red-bricked palazzo. It was where he came to "smell the guavas," the metaphor he used for his yearning for the tropics. Cartagena and its colonial history and architecture—the fortress that kept the pirates at bay—is as storied and beautiful as the Caribbean gets. It was also the place where his parents and most of his siblings had ended up and would religiously gather for New Year's. Gabo loved walking the streets and getting recognized if he needed a bath of fame, which he sometimes did.

Gabo Gabo sprinkles his stories with indiscreet family details. He tells me that he inherited the role of teller of family lore after his uncle Jaime, Gabo's brother, succumbed to dementia. "We live with the blessing of our storytelling ability and with the curse of memory loss," Gabo Gabo says. "My uncle wrote about the plague of forgetfulness in *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and here we are 50 years later—a premonition come true." Gabo Gabo's own mother Rita's illness is so advanced that she doesn't recognize her son.

The sunset hour is approaching as we walk toward Gabo's house. It is clear from Gabo Gabo's stories how much Gabo drew his stories and characters from real-life incidents and people. Gabo Gabo's sister Margot not only ate earth like Rebeca but was as spiteful as Amaranta, both characters in *One Hundred Years.* The character of Cándida Eréndira, the poor girl who is paraded and prostituted by her grandmother across the desert in the short story that bears her name, is based on a housemaid that serviced all his uncles, including Gabo. I blanch at some of these intimate details. "Did Gabo oppose the telling of such indiscretions?" I ask. According to Gabo Gabo, the great writer's advice was quite direct: Just make sure you charge money for them.

The family's skill at storytelling, Gabo Gabo tells me, stemmed from a long-standing tradition during which everybody would sit around and tell and retell the

history of their immediate family and its ancestors. "I can identify each one of my aunts and uncles in *One Hundred Years of Solitude,*" he says. His grandmother was unimpressed by how Gabo, who usually only listened during those storytelling sessions, recycled real-life family tales in his fiction. She always said that she preferred her daughter, Aida Rosa, who was a nun, to her son, who was a Nobel Prize winner.

Gabo Gabo points at a white balconied colonial mansion. That was the inspiration for Fermina Daza's house in *Love in the Time of Cholera,* he says. He asks me if I remember how her husband, Dr. Urbino, died. Yes, he fell from a ladder trying to grab a parrot, I say. "That is exactly how Gabo's grandfather died," he tells me. "So my uncle took that detail—something that happened when he was eight years old—and, *pum,* he grabbed it when he needed it."

After the tour, we stop by to see Jaime Abello, who runs the Gabo Foundation, an organization that García Márquez started in 1995 to promote independent journalism and that has also become an important guardian of Gabo's legacy. We find Abello sitting at his desk, a portrait of Gabo behind him. He is excited to show us his latest project: a 650-page book written by Juan Valentín Fernández, a Spanish doctor who spent a decade tracing all the medical details and real-life doctors that García Márquez mentioned in his fiction. "Look at how exhaustive Gabo was," Abello says, showing me the manuscript. "Everything, everything is based in reality." He turns to Gabo Gabo: "Do you remember the questionnaires?" García Márquez's closest siblings, friends, and associates would receive pages of questions. Abello got one when Gabo was working on the section in his memoirs about his time in Barranquilla. "He not only wanted to know the name of the brothels, he wanted to know the size of the rooms."

Abello then grabs another book published by the foundation, titled *Gabo, Journalist,* a chronology of his life as a reporter and a collection of his quotes about the profession. He opens the book and asks me to read one: "My books are a journalist's books, even if not many people see them as such. But these books involve a ton of research, checking of data, historical strictness, and dedication to the facts, which in essence makes them fictionalized or fantasized works of reportage. The methods of research and handling of data are those of a journalist." Abello closes the book with determination: "The real magic is Gabo's writing."

THE POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATION of Gabo's last novel, combined with the promise of the Netflix series, has sparked Gabomania in Colombia. Everyone who is anyone has written a newspaper column, recorded a podcast, or posted a photograph taken with the great man on social media. The government has organized a Macondo Route, hoping that just as the fans of *Game of Thrones* visit Croatia to see where the series was filmed, fans of Gabo's writing will come to Colombia to see the locations from *One Hundred Years.* In Barranquilla, Gabo readers can now stay in room 204 of a present-day hotel that claims it was the boarding house where he once wrote and borrowed soap.

The Colombian writer Carolina Sanín takes issue with all this off-the-cuff storytelling that takes over her country. She even refuses to call the novelist Gabo. He deserves better than the picturesque approach, she insists. "García Márquez wrote an epic about the birth and rebirth of civilization, written from the other side of the world. He is Latin America's Homer," she tells me as we sit in a coffee shop in Bogotá, where she grew up. "He was fully aware of the magnitude of that book. It was an illumination that defined the difference between the Old World and the New World. And why we are different."

When *Until August* came out in March, its selling point was that the protagonist was a modern woman who dared to explore her sexuality outside of her marriage. I find it endearing to see García Márquez taking this risk. It speaks of his resilience and discipline that got him to finish his novels: against all odds in his 20s and against all odds in his 80s, with the Damocles sword of dementia dangling over him. But a younger generation of women bristles at the marketing of the novella. "Honestly," says Nadia Celis, a Colombian-born writer and professor at Bowdoin College who specializes in feminist readings of the Caribbean, "women readers today don't need someone akin to a grandfather dictating our path to freedom, sexual or otherwise."

Celis can also be critical of her literary hero. "That I criticize his portrayal of the women does not mean I don't admire the author or that I dismiss the importance of his work," she says. In *One Hundred Years,* Remedios Moscote is nine years old when she is spotted by her Buendía suitor, is married right after her first menstruation, and dies right before giving birth to twins. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Florentino Ariza takes a 12-year-old girl as his lover while he waits for Fermina, the love of his life, to give in to him. When she finally does, he abandons her. América Vicuña, at 14, kills herself. "When I realized that I had read and loved that book as a teenager," says Celis, "and had not seen the abuse of América Vicuña, I sobbed."

Later, Celis leaves a message on my phone. "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a warning about our capacity for self-destruction, particularly brought on by men," she says with professorial confidence. "It is a manual of patriarchy." García Márquez could see the destruction caused by greed and power. "Sadly, he overlooked the complicity of men when it came to their domination of women."

GABO'S AND MERCEDES'S ashes are interred in the courtyard of the Mercy Convent in Cartagena. A bust of a smiling and mustachioed Gabo watches over it. Their resting place, surrounded by bushes with tiny pink flowers, is tended by a gardener who seems as interested in chatting up visitors as he is in looking after the plants. He heard that Gabo never actually wrote his books. In fact, he tells me with a wink of complicity, they were all written by a peasant who would slip the Nobel laureate the complete pages. All Gabo had to do was take them to a publisher!

A Mexican tourist, holding a copy of one of Gabo's books, interrupts. He wants a picture in front of the memorial. "I love Gabo," he offers wholeheartedly.

A security guard joins us. "Some people come and kneel in front of him," he says.

Yes, but he didn't write the books, the gardener insists.

The guard points to the second floor of the cloister where he says Mercedes's ghost appears at noon on her way to microwave her lunch. He also tells of the cloister's cat that went feral when her ashes arrived. It is a complicated story somehow related to the news that in 1990 Gabo fathered a daughter out of wedlock. I can't help but wonder at all the things that Gabo left behind, all the stories in the air.

"Who will keep it all?" I wonder aloud.

The guard's answer could not be simpler, more poetic, or more in keeping with García Márquez's style:

"The living." ■



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99 it's a matter of national importance to us. The individual matters."

We had flown in for a sit-down with Jorge Rodríguez, Maduro's close associate and designated Washington whisperer. After landing on a secluded airstrip, we were met by a Venezuelan security team and driven in a white van to a sprawling villa with jaw-dropping views of the coral-blue Caribbean. The contrast between the location and the topic could not have been starker.

The sunset meeting had been arranged by an intermediary whom I'll call Massimo, a debonair entrepreneur with business ties in Caracas and the US. As a sideline, he has worked to resolve the issue of Americans languishing in Venezuelan prisons and was a key player in brokering the release of Heath, Khan, and the others.

Massimo is what Carstens calls a wizard: a hyperconnected contrarian thinker with a knack for finding solutions to intractable problems. "He's trusted by the Venezuelan opposition, by the regime, by the United States, by the Qataris," Carstens explained. "In the world of kings, wizards are the people underneath them that can meet, close the gaps between different positions, and start to pull deals together in a way that the kings can't. I'd say, on my list of five wizards, Massimo is right up there at the top."

For an hour, Carstens was seated on a veranda with Rodríguez and Massimo—who were smoking Cuban cigars and sipping rum—before I joined the conversation. The Venezuelan ask was unmistakable: They wanted Alex Saab. And in return for his safe passage, Rodríguez suggested, his country was willing to give up Americans it was holding, starting with Eyvin Hernandez.

Carstens politely parried with a consolation prize: Venezuela, he said, was welcome to send a representative to visit Saab at the federal lockup in Miami. Rodríguez took a shine to the idea and said that if Carstens made it happen, then he, in turn, would arrange a follow-up meeting with Maduro himself—in Caracas.

"I'm cautiously optimistic that we'll be able to get Eyvin back within the next four or five or six weeks," the envoy said as we navigated the dark, winding road back to the landing strip. "And frankly, I might not have said that five or six hours ago." He stressed the importance of personal interaction. "In every negotiation there gets to be this point of stress where the senior leadership is demanding this, that, and the other—and the people at the negotiating table have to trust each other, have to know each other, and have to be willing to, in a way, not just invest in each other, but really fight for the negotiation points that they've worked towards. And that does not happen unless you get face-to-face."

He would later continue, "The people I talk to, most of them didn't go to Harvard or the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. They came up in hard environments. Some have stolen elections. Some have killed their way to the top. Part of my job is to establish empathy." Before each meeting, he said, "We'll actually come up with a strategy. But when we finally sit down across from someone, especially someone that comes from a pretty tough country, an adversary, a dictatorship, you have to start relying on intuition."

WHAT CARSTENS COULDN'T intuit was the fact that Rodríguez was, in diplo-speak, channel surfing—talking to other US officials, promising different things in different conversations, and basically playing the ends against the middle. A week before we had arrived in Canouan, Rodríguez, whose movements are constrained by US sanctions, had traveled to Doha for a clandestine meeting. His interlocutor on the US side was Juan Gonzalez, the NSC's senior director for the Western Hemisphere. A Colombian-born veteran of the Obama years, he had spent more than a decade focused on the Andean region, and his views on Maduro and his minions carried weight with Biden and Sullivan.

"What we wanted was to do this in secret for a while until we actually knew where things were going," Gonzalez told me as we huddled in an attic-like room on the top floor of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. "Qatar, much like they've been helping us in other ways, helped facilitate some of those exchanges."

At the direction of Sullivan and his deputy, Jon Finer, Gonzalez was trying to reorient US policy on Venezuela away from Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, which, among other things, had involved recognizing an antiregime figure, Juan Guaidó, as the legitimate leader of the country. More than 50 nations had gone along with the gambit. But in April 2023 it became untenable: Guaidó was kicked to the curb by the opposition itself. The Biden administration sensed an opening and, with the blessing of the opposition's chief negotiator, Gerardo Blyde, began in-person talks with the Maduro regime.

Gonzalez noted that early sessions were filled with the ritual "airing of grievances." Despite his training as a psychiatrist, Rodríguez evidently would not contain his disdain for the US. "The interesting thing about Jorge is that his father was tortured and killed by a previous government," Gonzalez elaborated. "So he has, in my view, a deep-seated hatred of America as an imperialist-affiliated government. These guys feel they are on this mission to bring a better Venezuela and that we are the ones standing in the way of their ability to create this socialist or communist utopia."

"We would say to them, 'You don't want to be in the same club as countries like North Korea. We should focus on negotiations, clear the decks,'" he recalled. Some issues were resolved quickly, like the repatriation of untold numbers of people back to Venezuela who had unlawfully crossed America's southern border. But Maduro's representatives held firm on the issue of American hostages, whom, as Gonzalez lamented, they treated like currency.

THE HOSTAGE PORTFOLIO is replete with false starts, shifting motivations, euphoric moments of promise, and dead ends. All were on full display last June when I landed at Simón Bolívar International Airport near Caracas. Rodríguez had sent word that his president was amenable to engaging with Carstens, who would be arriving on a government plane. And Maduro had seemed agreeable to granting me a rare press interview, but I was told he first wanted to take my measure. It was not clear what that would entail, but there I was in Venezuela with my blue passport, which no one asked to see, much less stamp. Rodríguez, I'm told, had set things up so that our group, flying in our own small aircraft, never encountered an immigration official.

I was ushered off the jet and into a bullet-proof car with some burly bodyguards. We waited planeside until a matte gray G-III pulled up. Carstens bounded down the steps, ducked into the car, and our armored convoy raced off.

As we made our way into the capital, however, anonymous plane spotters—who had tracked the tail number of Carstens's jet—took to social media with allegations that the envoy had arrived on a CIA aircraft and that a hostage trade or recovery was imminent. The reports were not accurate. The plane belonged to a State Department contractor, and Carstens was there to see Maduro in hopes that he might hand over an American as a good-faith gesture while continuing to seek a grander bargain with the US—one that might include sanctions relief that could help the oil-rich country reopen its spigots. For my part, I was there to see if Maduro would speak about his reasons for taking Americans hostage and the prospects for their release. Our collective hope was that the separate diplomatic and journalistic forays might aid in springing Eyvin Hernandez.

The following morning, as we wound our way through Caracas, I glanced over at Carstens, who was looking intently at a card he had taken from his wallet. When I asked him to explain, he said that when headed into a negotiation with "an adversary about trying to release an American," he tends to refer to a Bible verse. "I'll just read and meditate and pray to God." The verse that day was Matthew 10:16, which he summarized as: "Help me be as wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove, and please give me the words that you want me to offer in that moment." In essence, he was beckoning the Almighty: "I might not be smart enough to come up with the brilliant words to say. So, Lord, if you can help me by giving me the words that would be most effective, I'm here."

We arrived at Rodríguez's tightly guarded compound in a leafy part of town. He invited me to sit in on his meeting with Carstens. While some of it was off the record, the two men—over rounds of espresso and local pastries—shared an easy rapport. Consistent with his remit, Carstens sought the immediate return of wrongfully detained Americans. Rodríguez, though, had his own demands, and Saab was priority number one. He casually boasted that he was talking to other US parties, conferring with Gonzalez at the NSC about the broader US-Venezuelan relationship. Still, our host said Maduro wanted to see us at Miraflores, the presidential palace, at 7 p.m.

In the hours that followed, Carstens and a small team of American diplomats visited the House of Dreams, where they checked up on Hernandez and other detainees. They then stopped at another facility where, to their surprise, they encountered a prisoner decked out in a pinstriped Gucci leisure suit. It was Leonard Glenn Francis, the fugitive known as Fat Leonard. To say he was wrongly detained would be a stretch. The Malaysian national was rightfully detained, but in the wrong country. Eight years earlier, he had pleaded guilty to bribing scores of US officers in what is said to be the largest corruption scandal in the history of the Navy. Before sentencing, however, he ditched his ankle bracelet in San Diego and headed to Cuba, then Venezuela.

The American delegation also saw two other noteworthy individuals: Airan Berry and Luke Denman. Former Green Berets, the pair were rolled up by the Venezuelans in 2020 for their alleged part in a half-baked coup attempt. For their role in "Operation Gideon," they'd been sentenced to 20 years. The envoy, in the absence of a local embassy with consular services, checked in on them during his visits. The men—veterans of the same Special Forces group that Carstens had served with years before—told him point-blank to prioritize the release of other Americans.

While US officials were still inside the correctional facility, Massimo texted me to say that Maduro had canceled our meeting, citing an unforeseen "emergency." What's more, Rodríguez had split town with him.

I was not shocked that a head of state would blow me off; that's an occupational hazard for journalists. It was unnerving, however, that a chest-thumping autocrat would ghost an American president's special envoy—someone Maduro had specifically invited in hopes of improving Venezuela's fortunes. It was also a bad sign that he made no effort to reschedule. It was worse still for Hernandez, who at that point was entering his 15th month in captivity.

We gathered at a private residence in the hills for a debrief and dinner. Then things took an even bleaker turn when a message came through from Rodríguez indicating he was on the road with Maduro and regurgitating social media claims about a CIA plane and a secret mission. The implication was clear: The Venezuelans were blaming the US side for a lack of operational security.

As midnight drew near, we heard that Maduro was on a military base seeking to shore up what was described as lackluster support among key members of the armed forces—the hidden hand that keeps him in power. (Earlier this year, in fact, the government arrested 32 alleged plotters for supposedly trying to assassinate him.) With each phone call or text, the whole thing felt a little coup-y, and those of us gathered around the dinner table scrambled to arrange our departures.

It seemed like a fitting coda that even my exit was fraught. Carstens's plane—with his retinue of officials carrying black diplomatic passports—taxied and took off first. When our pilots tried to follow suit, the engines powered down. One of them exited to troubleshoot the problem. And as I looked down at the security officials outside my window, I was left to ponder how I would explain to them—given Maduro's cold shoulder—why my decidedly civilian passport had neither an entry nor an exit stamp. Fortunately, it was a blown fuse that was quickly fixed. We flew out with Massimo standing on a bluff alongside the runway, waving farewell.

Before we departed, I'd watched Carstens fume, uncharacteristically, pounding on the table at one point. He had brought along his entourage, only to have been turned away without explanation. "We're done," he'd said, referring to the Maduro bait and switch. "I'm going to worry about Afghanistan, China, Syria, Russia—because this was, actually, no-shit important. Mathematically, this is *not* going to happen right now." I understood this to mean, sadly and quite decisively, that Hernandez would not be getting out any time soon. (Maduro and Rodríguez declined repeated requests for an interview.)

THE FRACAS IN Caracas led to considerable soul-searching. But as Carstens focused on hard cases in other places, the administration designated Gonzalez as the single point of contact for the Maduro regime.

Throughout the summer and into the fall, he met with Rodríguez on the down-low in unexpected locales, alternating between Doha and Milan. Whatever else was on the agenda—sanctions relief, oil production, Maduro's desire for respect—the issue of hostages was never far from the fore. "Eyvin and the unjustly detained Americans kept being something that

they kept taking off the table and taking off the table," Gonzalez recounted with exasperation.

Things came to a head in a rendezvous at a private residence in Doha in late September. Gonzalez represented the US side; Rodríguez led the Venezuelan delegation—with a Qatari interlocutor. Gonzalez recalled, "We were getting very close to finishing our understanding that would allow them to finalize the political agreement with the opposition and would include a good-faith gesture at the beginning. That, for us, was Eyvin."

Intent on wrapping things up, Gonzalez went to the US embassy in Doha for a secure call with Sullivan and Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer at the White House. With their blessing, he returned to the villa in hopes of sealing a deal. When he arrived, though, his Qatari host pulled him aside to say that while Gonzalez was away, the Venezuelans had had several calls with Maduro. For his part, Gonzalez watched as Rodríguez and the governor of Miranda State in Venezuela "got into a side room and just started screaming at each other."

"They came in and said that they couldn't do Eyvin," he recalled. After several more hours of negotiation, Gonzalez flew home empty-handed.

THEN THE GROUND shifted.

Nine days after the stalemate in Doha, Hamas forces swarmed over the Israeli border. And Carstens and his lieutenants were tested as never before. "October 7th happened, and everyone was shocked, stunned, surprised—pick your word," he told me. "I initially thought my caseload might have gone up by 27 Americans who might have been either killed or captured and taken into Gaza." As remains were recovered and identified, the number of American hostages, it turned out, was 12. (Some would later be returned in a trade. Others, the US determined, had perished.)

"There were a lot of sleepless nights because of both workload and just the pain of imagining what those people were going through," he said. His voice began to crack. "It's a heavy weight," he said of the ongoing horrors endured by the hostages in Gaza. "It's probably bad enough if you're an average citizen watching this, but it's worse when it's your job to get these people back." His team began dialogues with a whole new set of families going through immeasurable anguish.

"There is a sense," Finer said, "that when a crisis happens somewhere in the world, the US government can only focus on one thing at a time." Not so, he insisted. "While we were negotiating and working on getting hostages released in Gaza, at the same time, Venezuela was also something that we did not take our eye off of."

The Venezuelans, meanwhile, were finally reading the room. With their allies—Iran and Russia—antagonizing and actively confronting US interests, the Maduro regime had apparently sensed that Washington's tolerance for gamesmanship had worn thin. They returned to the bargaining table in earnest.

And so, with the world's attention seemingly focused anywhere but South America, on October 18, 2023, Blinken heralded the arrival of the Barbados Agreement, which laid out a road map for Venezuela to hold credible, competitive elections in 2024. Although the deal was signed by the Maduro government *and* the opposition, the US had acted as a midwife, providing crucial sanctions relief that, absent corruption, might allow Venezuela—with the world's largest proven oil reserves—to rehabilitate its shambolic economy. Americans, it was hoped, might benefit from better prices at the pump.

In announcing the agreement, Blinken said American officials understood that by the end of November, Venezuela would "begin the release of all wrongfully detained US nationals and Venezuelan political prisoners." But again, there was a snag. While some Venezuelans were indeed freed in the weeks that followed, Maduro and his cronies did not let a single American go.

Hernandez and his family expected that he would be released by Thanksgiving. But the holiday came and went. So, too, did the November 30 deadline. To keep up the pressure, his father and brother traveled to Washington with Drew Havens. At the time, Havens told me, they had heard that another American had recently attempted suicide. "It'll be a tough pill to swallow if Eyvin doesn't get out soon," he said.

As the days ticked by in December and the capital was full of infighting over aid to Israel and Ukraine, not to mention securing the southern border, behind the scenes at the White House, a frantic effort was underway to extract those held in Caracas. Time was tight, particularly with the nation heading into an election year, in which every action or inaction might be politicized. Suddenly, what was once impossible became inevitable.

On December 6, 2023, Rodríguez called Gonzalez with a proposition: If the US could find a way to send Maduro's moneyman Alex Saab back, Venezuela would release all Americans, wrongfully detained or not, hand over Fat Leonard, and let 20 of its own political prisoners walk free.

Finer and White House chief of staff Jeff Zients went to see Biden in the Oval Office on December 7. "We laid out for the president our understanding of the deal that was on the table," Finer recalled. "He asked if everybody on our national security team was on the same page. We said that they were." At that point the president wondered how the deal might play in Congress and called Delaware senator Chris Coons, his friend and close Capitol Hill ally, for counsel. Satisfied that the swap was politically defensible, Biden instructed his team to put the wheels in motion.

AT 6 A.M. on December 20, 2023, I was on the tarmac at Miami International with Carstens and David Cotter, the FBI hostage specialist assigned to the White House, who bore a strong resemblance to Irish actor Domhnall Gleeson. Moments later, US marshals pulled up in a minivan and escorted Saab—shackled and sporting a man bun, sweatpants, and a crisp white T-shirt—up the stairs of a G-III, nearly identical to the one that had caused such a stir in Caracas six months earlier.

The preceding day and a half had been a whirlwind. In the eyes of the White House, the Venezuelans were backpedaling. "The reason this got stuck is because they all of a sudden said that they were going to release the 20 Venezuelan prisoners *later,*" Gonzalez recalled ruefully. The planes were already in Miami and the American team was effectively camped out in a hotel lobby nearby. I watched them pace and field a flurry of calls from Washington and Caracas. Gonzalez was doing much the same at the White House. "This was probably the only time I've thrown something across the room in my office," he told me. "I briefed this up and said, 'Do we go or do we not go?'" Ultimately, Finer and Sullivan put the question to Biden, who insisted that Venezuela stick to the deal. The trade, originally scheduled for the 19th, was delayed.

"I was freaking out at that point," said Gonzalez. "What if they pull back the

Americans, then we'll get nothing. But Jake and Jon said, 'Calm down, stand your ground, we have our guidance,'" Gonzalez recalled. "Saab is a horrible criminal. It is a very, very tough decision that only the president of the United States can make. And if we were going to do something like that, we wanted everybody"—meaning all US citizens, Fat Leonard, and the 20 political prisoners the Venezuelans had promised.

A waiting game began. The following evening, however, the decision was made to send the planes to Canouan and force the issue. The same sparse island runway. The same setup: captives held in aircraft. This time, six planes—two American and four Venezuelan—rolled into position. While the detainees' freedom seemed close, it was by no means certain.

Whatever understanding had been reached while the team was in Miami was firm enough for the White House to authorize the mission—sending Carstens and company south with Saab in tow. And yet details remained to be ironed out before they would greenlight the trade, which would have required Cotter to obtain Saab's countersignature on the pardon papers that days earlier the president had executed, by hand, in the dining room off the Oval.

Regardless, the sides began going through the motions. Rodríguez boarded the G-III to confirm Saab's presence. Carstens bounded up the stairs of each of the three planes flown up from Caracas that were carrying captives. "I found Eyvin on the first plane I entered. I looked him in the eyes and said, 'It's finally happening. You're going home,'" Carstens recounted. "I also told him, 'We're gonna need some time to work things out here on the ground, but the day ends with you back home in the United States.'"

Carstens also confirmed the presence of Fat Leonard, the American Green Berets Berry and Denman, and a mix of citizens who had been—or were in line to be—designated as wrongfully detained. All told, the US was set to receive 10 citizens and one fugitive in exchange for an indicted money launderer.

The American team then boarded the lead Venezuelan plane—belonging to Maduro—on which Rodríguez had arrived. In Washington's view, the Venezuelans needed to affirmatively prove that they had released the 20 political prisoners. "They were in different courthouses or prisons around the country and so it was not actually easy to get verification—essentially photos of them leaving custody," explained Finer, who, along with Gonzalez, was following events from the White House. "A number of hours went by where the Venezuelans were saying, 'Just go ahead and execute the deal.' We were saying, 'We're not going to get suckered into doing something when it's not clear you've lived up to your end.'"

Aboard Maduro's plane, Massimo tried to keep the mood light, hoping for the best. Both sides conferred with their capitals on cell phones, turning the Canouan runway into a makeshift *Casablanca*. While things were outwardly convivial, tempers were flaring over the phone. "There were lots of calls going," Gonzalez explained, and in "those hours, I was screaming at Jorge. I said, 'We're not going to be wheels up until every single Venezuelan has been released; we just can't do it. That's our instruction.'"

But Rodríguez had other ideas. According to Gonzalez, who at the time was pacing the halls at the White House, "On multiple occasions, Rodríguez would say, 'I'm just going to get out of here.'" Cotter sensed the situation was deteriorating: "We started to get worried that maybe they"—the group on Rodríguez's plane—"were going to try and take off" before everything was finalized. So Cotter crossed the tarmac, climbed the steps of the lead Venezuelan jet, and made a beeline for Saab, who was seated "right in the middle." Cotter made it clear that if Saab were to leave without the presidential pardon, he would revert to being a fugitive, forever in the crosshairs of US authorities. Saab took in the gravity of the ultimatum. Then he announced to the other passengers, "I will stay." Said Cotter: "At that point, everything kind of settled down."

"By about 1:30 in the afternoon," Finer recounted, "it was clear that we had documentation that the political prisoners had been released." Saab, with pardon papers in hand, would fly to a hero's welcome in Caracas, where Maduro would praise him lavishly—and place him in charge of the country's international investment center.

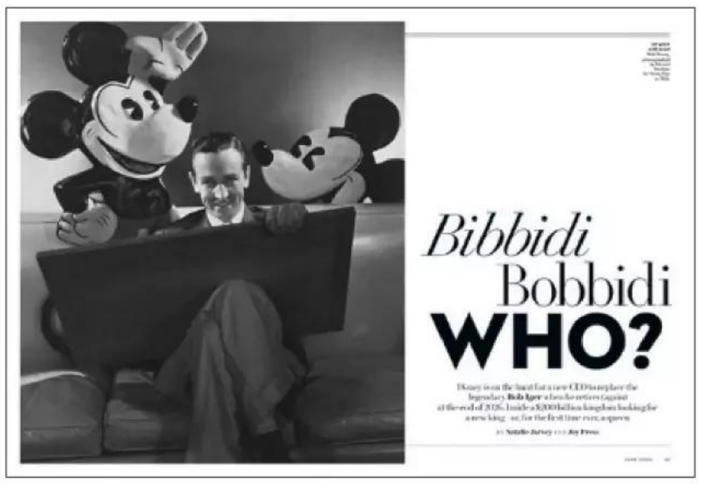
As Saab departed, the two American planes made their way down the runway, four long and tense hours after they had arrived. Hernandez and the others were aboard the G-III with Carstens and Cotter. Some 2,500 miles away, in Milwaukee, Biden stood at the foot of Air Force One to announce, "We've secured the release of every American being held in Venezuela.... They're in an aircraft on their way home to the United States." He then emphasized what his administration considers a cornerstone of its foreign policy: "We have no higher priority than the release of... Americans being held hostage."

"AS WE WERE taking off," Carstens recounted, "I could see Eyvin lost in his thoughts, just looking at the blue waters of Canouan." The Angeleno, whose fellow public defenders joined forces with his family when he disappeared, was filled with gratitude. "I'm overwhelmed because of all the support, all the love that I received," he later told me. "You don't expect this mass of people that you know in your life to get together and dedicate themselves to getting you out. That's not something anybody expects—I don't care how great your friends are. But it just so happens I have the greatest friends in the world."

Of the bonds built behind bars with Osman Khan and Matthew Heath, Hernandez said, "In the most unlikely of places—a prison—you find this community that embraces you, that gives you solidarity and love and hope and strength. It showed me what life could be like if we all just decided to help each other and treat each other like family." Hernandez does not look back in anger, nor does he regard his confinement as wasted time. "Reflection is a very powerful thing—it's something that we almost never get to do because we're so busy in our daily lives. And so, what I did was reflect on who I wanted to become—what was the best way for me to overcome the daily struggles and focus on being a better person while I'm there so that when I get out, I'm going to be ready for a new chapter in my life."

The jet was hurtling toward Joint Base San Antonio, where Hernandez and his fellow hostages would soon be reunited with loved ones. During the flight they got some shut-eye. But Carstens, not surprisingly, was still haunted. "Venezuela's finally in my rearview mirror," he recalled. "But then the phrase that goes right on after that is: Now can we just clear up Afghanistan, Russia and China, and Gaza? That's where your head goes."

Over the last two years, Carstens and his crew have recovered 19 Americans from the House of Dreams and other Venezuelan prisons. Yet there was no looking back. "You cannot rest on your laurels," Carstens said. "You can't sit still. People are depending on us getting our shit together and figuring out how to get this done." ■



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87 done: "We emerged out of that process with a greater sense of respect for each other than I've personally ever felt before working with a studio. It was very contentious with 20th Century Fox and Paramount on *Titanic,* it was contentious with 20th Century Fox on the first *Avatar* film, and I didn't experience any of that with Alan."

Picking a new CEO is not a personality contest, at least not entirely. But for what it's worth, multiple sources say that Bergman is old-school and can be prickly and impatient. He's not considered the likeliest candidate for the CEO job, but fixing a film studio doesn't leave much time to audition for a new gig. Bergman, of course, isn't the only movie executive contending with fallout from the pandemic. If Disney's upcoming slate—*Inside Out 2, Deadpool & Wolverine,* and *Moana 2*—scores at the box office, Iger and the board will certainly notice.

AS THE HISTORIC dual strikes stretched into fall last year, things looked dire for every traditional Hollywood studio. Iger invested in an unaffected part of the company: theme parks. In September, Disney announced that it would double its spending, from nearly $30 billion to roughly $60 billion, to expand the parks and cruise lines. Disneyland Resort, for one, could get new shops, restaurants, and rides based on *Avatar, Frozen,* and *Zootopia.*

The investment was a clear vote of confidence in D'Amaro, who has spent much of his 26-year Disney career working his way through the parks business. Polished and professional, he once moved to Hong Kong Disneyland for four years to rebuild relationships with partners in the region after a rocky launch. He also oversaw Disneyland's Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge and spearheaded the parks' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple people tell us that no problem is too small for him, even as his responsibilities have grown. Years ago, when D'Amaro was still an up-and-coming executive, he gave *Avatar* producer Jon Landau a tour of Disney World as they were preparing to bring Pandora to the park. "We are walking around the park for the first time, and I see him stop behind us," Landau says. "He uses a little cane he has and he picks up some garbage that was on the ground, puts it in the trash bin, and continues on. I thought that was so great. That's the attention to detail that Josh puts into something."

D'Amaro seems private about his family life. Of Iger's top lieutenants, he's the only one with a prominent public Instagram account—he has 151,000 followers—but it's entirely devoted to his job. An executive who has worked with him says he's more image conscious than he lets on: "That effortless cool, there's effort behind it." D'Amaro lives with his wife in Orange County, has college-age children, and quietly travels in rarefied circles. During the pandemic he and Delta CEO Ed Bastian worked to revitalize the hospitality industry as members of the U.S. Travel Association. Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, who counts Disney as one of his company's key clients, considers D'Amaro a friend and shares his love of Foo Fighters. "He's somebody who bleeds Disney," Benioff says. "His heart and soul is very much wrapped up inside the Magic Kingdom."

Though he's a parks guy, D'Amaro certainly isn't Chapek 2.0. It's not easy to win the loyalty of hourly workers who sometimes feel marginalized at a company Disney's size, but D'Amaro has navigated that adeptly. (That could come in handy: Performers at Disneyland are now unionizing.) The former colleague calls him a "nice guy to have a drink with," though he adds that, as a manager, D'Amaro prefers being good cop rather than bad cop. Though he's never worked at Disney's film or TV studios, D'Amaro has established relationships with creative executives like Marvel's Kevin Feige and Disney Animation's Jennifer Lee as he brings their IP to the parks. "Josh's got a wealth of experience that often doesn't get talked about," says Jim MacPhee, who worked with D'Amaro in the parks. "Just because he has not had the title 'president of ABC' doesn't mean he's not capable."

D'Amaro recently worked with Iger to spearhead Disney's $1.5 billion investment in Epic Games, the company behind the video game phenomenon Fortnite. The deal includes plans to build a virtual universe with Disney characters for players to explore. The announcement of the deal comes at a good time for Disney. Just as the company emerged from the strikes late last year, Peltz, the billionaire investor, shot another arrow in his battle to exert influence over the company.

Peltz was pushing for two seats on the Disney board and came armed with more than $3 billion in Disney shares largely owned by Ike Perlmutter, the disgruntled former Marvel chairman who sold the company to Disney in 2009, only to be quickly sidelined. "Disney has woefully underperformed its peers and its potential," Peltz's firm, Trian Partners, said in a statement that pointed to what it saw as Disney's relatively lackluster stock, falling earnings-per-share, disappointing studio content—and lack of an orderly succession plan.

ONE OF DISNEY'S counterattacks against Peltz involved unfurling some flashy announcements about ESPN. Days before most of the sports media world gathered in Las Vegas to watch the Chiefs take on the 49ers in the Super Bowl, news came that ESPN was teaming up with rivals at Fox and Warner Bros. Discovery to create a jumbo sports streaming service full of live NFL and NBA games and more.

Pitaro assumed leadership of ESPN six years ago, but this year will define his legacy. He'd been working on the massive streaming project for months as part of his quest to reshape the beleaguered sports media giant for an era when Amazon's Prime Video streams Thursday Night Football. Disney had more big news to drop: ESPN's sports programming would be on a stand-alone streaming service by fall of 2025.

Live sports is one of the only ratings bets left, but ESPN has been squeezed by the high price tag for sports rights as the cable TV business withers. People who worked there during the salad days say it's been painful to watch. "ESPN was a sort of golden child, and you could make the argument that its cash flow helped pay for some tremendous additions to the company, whether it's Star Wars or Marvel or theme park rides," says a former employee. "I'm sure it's been a uniquely difficult time for everybody there."

Pitaro is a former college football player and an avid Yankees fan. He led Yahoo's media division before his friend Sheryl

Sandberg, then a Disney board member, introduced him to Iger. In 2017, while Pitaro was running Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media, ESPN's charismatic leader, John Skipper, abruptly resigned, later revealing that he had a cocaine problem and was the target of an extortion attempt. Pitaro's love of sports helped him land the job.

You can often find Pitaro eating among his employees in the cafeteria at ESPN's sprawling Bristol, Connecticut, headquarters. "He's not somebody who has a giant ego," says Michael Levine, cohead of CAA Sports, who was fraternity brothers with him at Cornell. "Part of the reason he's had so much success at the Walt Disney Company and in business is that he's very solution-oriented." Pitaro, who's married to *Top Gun: Maverick* actor Jean Louisa Kelly, may not be based in Hollywood, but he's good with talent. He's been on Iger's leadership team the longest and, of the top candidates, has worked in the most Disney fiefdoms. Still, by the time his biggest swings pay off, it may be too late for him to get the CEO job. He has certainly made a mark on ESPN already, shoring up relationships with the NFL and MLB and moving the company into the lucrative sports-betting space.

Some question whether Pitaro is ready to succeed Iger, but virtually no one has a negative word to say about the guy. "The six floors of the Team Disney building is a snake pit, but he's the best human being bar none," says a former executive.

AS THE END of 2023 neared, Iger seemed to have finally settled back into running Disney. "I feel that we've just emerged from a period of a lot of fixing to one of building again, and I can tell you building is a lot more fun than fixing," he said at an employee town hall. A few months later, in February, Disney reported that earnings were up, entertainment streaming losses had shrunk to $138 million, and domestic parks and experiences had delivered nearly $6.3 billion in revenue. The company also announced there'd be a $3 billion stock buyback plan that would put money into the pockets of Disney's shareholders.

Even Iger's biggest antagonist during the strikes, SAG-AFTRA president Fran Drescher, has eased off. "When you live the life that he gets to live because of his position and power, you become desensitized to what the optics are and how the average worker is going to perceive something," she told *Vanity Fair* after the actors strike ended. "I'm sure that if I wasn't in opposition to him through this and I just met him at a cocktail party, I would think that he was a very lovely and charming man."

On April 3, Iger ended Peltz's siege on the boardroom. The investor's push for seats had lasted over a year, and he and Disney had sometimes traded jabs every few days. Peltz questioned Iger's leadership and made remarks right out of the Ron DeSantis playbook: "Why do I have to have a Marvel that's all women? Not that I have anything against women, but why do I have to do that? Why can't I have Marvels that are both? Why do I need an all-Black cast?" Disney called Peltz's proxy fight a vanity play for someone with no media or entertainment experience.

In the end, the Disney family (including Iger critic Abigail Disney) and George Lucas urged shareholders to vote with Disney. "Creating magic is not for amateurs," Lucas said in a statement. But one of Peltz's allies, the influential advisory firm Institutional Shareholder Services, got in a good shot at Disney for its previously lame game of thrones: "Given the major missteps and severe consequences of the failed 2020 succession, particularly for a company that already had a history of succession drama, it may be difficult for others to simply trust that the board, albeit refreshed, will get it right this time."

The Disney board has outlined a thorough process this time around. As the company said in its statement to *VF,* "It is a top priority of the Board to not only name a successor, but to position them for long-term success, and with more than two-and-a-half years remaining under Bob Iger's term as CEO, the Succession Planning Committee is proceeding thoughtfully and carefully." The internal candidates are said to be working with executive coaches, learning about parts of the business they don't oversee, and receiving guidance directly from Iger. The public nature of the search means the pressure is on. A quick, small win in the optics department for aspirants might mean sitting close to Iger at events, or even dressing more like him. "Dana, like Bob, is a real star," says Murphy. "When they walk into a room, the energy changes." D'Amaro has the Iger vibe too. As Benioff of Salesforce puts it, "You can't look at Josh without looking at Bob."

Speaking of which, not everybody wants Iger to leave at all. "I don't know what the rush is to make a change," says analyst Reif Ehrlich. To which one of Hollywood's top agents adds, "Look, the fucking president's like 800 years old and he's *just* starting to wobble. Bob's unbelievable. He's at the top of all of his powers." But when he wrote his 2019 book *The Ride of a Lifetime,* Iger seemed to have made peace with saying goodbye. "We all want to believe we're irreplaceable," he wrote. "The trick is to be self-aware enough that you don't cling to the notion that you are the only person who can do this job." Now he and Disney just have to prove it. ■

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Anse Victorin elevates beachwear to couture level, combining elegance and comfort in the finest fabrics and designs. Founded by designer Elena Brenner, Anse Victorin offers versatile ready-to-wear pieces as well as swimwear, for an elegant summer wardrobe. Made in Italy and France. Visit **ansevictorin.com** IG: **@anse_victorin**

À TOI ET MOI



À Toi et Moi is not just another fashion brand; it is a philosophy and a mindset. The brand stands for the power of self-realisation, and aims to inspire individuals to embrace their unique style and use fashion to express themselves authentically. Explore their range of accessories online at **atoietmoi.com** IG: **@atoietmoilondon**

SOMEBODY ELSE'S GUY



Introducing Somebody Else's Guy, the brand dedicated to crafting luxury gender fluid garments which champion diversity. Created by Newcastle based designer Corey Dixon. Corey breathes new life into pre-loved clothing through up-cycling, making couture accessible and sustainable. There are no labels here, apart from the classic song each piece is named after. Visit **somebodyelsesguy.co.uk** IG: **@somebodyelsesguy**

ELIZÉE



Made for women who love beautiful heels and want comfort, Elizée sets a new standard for comfort-defining luxury and all-day wearability. Handcrafted in Italy from buttery-soft leather and engineered with a triple-layered cushioned insole, each sophisticated style empowers women to feel confident and supported all day long. Visit **elizeeshoes.com** IG: **@elizeeshoes**

VALNUE



VALNUE is a brand where sustainable luxury meets exquisite lingerie. This luxury label specialises in exquisitely crafted silk pieces–from lingerie and sleepwear, to ready-to-wear dresses. Each VALNUE garment is meticulously constructed using the finest fabrics, expert craftsmanship, and innovative design. With an unwavering commitment to quality and detail, VALNUE empowers women to approach every moment with unwavering confidence. Visit **valnue.com** IG: **@valnuelingerie**

ATELIER LÉA PARMIGIANI



Swiss brand Atelier Léa Parmigiani passionately crafts unique silk accessories with creativity and artistry. Each meticulously hand-painted piece is an expression of uniqueness, allowing individuals to express their individuality and stand out with elegance. Photography credits: Tam Berger Photography. Discover more at **atelierleaparmigiani.com** IG: **@atelier_lea_parmigiani**

SORBAS

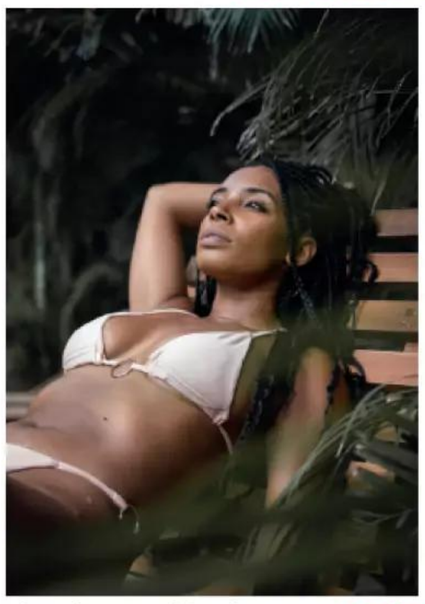


Summer is easy when you wear the right footwear. Berlin based brand SORBAS delivers the perfect pairing with their vegetable-tanned, Greek-made leather sandals and equally covetable vegan cactus sneakers. Their minimalist aesthetics seamlessly integrate into your everyday wardrobe, ensuring an elegant yet comfortable summer experience. Visit **sorbasshoes.com** IG: **@sorbasberlin**

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The Lookbook

TOP KNOT SWIM



Top Knot Swim is a handmade swimwear brand, designed by Nadia Weekes. All designs are created in Toronto Canada and support the slow fashion movement while creating statement pieces. Handcrafted to support your individuality, their pieces are designed in creative materials and tie up in multiple ways to achieve the desired look. Visit **topknotswim.com** IG: **@topknotswim**

DEFIED



Emily Harbottle, the founder and design lead of DEFIED, created this luxury fashion brand to empower women. After showing her collection at London Graduate Fashion Week, Harbottle was offered a job with a top designer in NYC - but knew that it wasn't the right time to relocate. Instead, this became the catalyst for her to create her own brand. Shop her collections at **defied.co.uk** IG: **@defied_fashion_brand**

WEARNIKI



wearNIKI is an esteemed boutique cut-and-sew label renowned for crafting sophisticated attire for accomplished women. Proudly epitomising American luxury, wearNIKI's creations are designed within the United States for their cool and stylish clientele. Embracing the ethos of a "winning lifestyle brand", wearNIKI stands as a beacon of empowerment and refinement for the modern woman. Visit **wearniki.com** IG: **@wear_niki**

BE WE



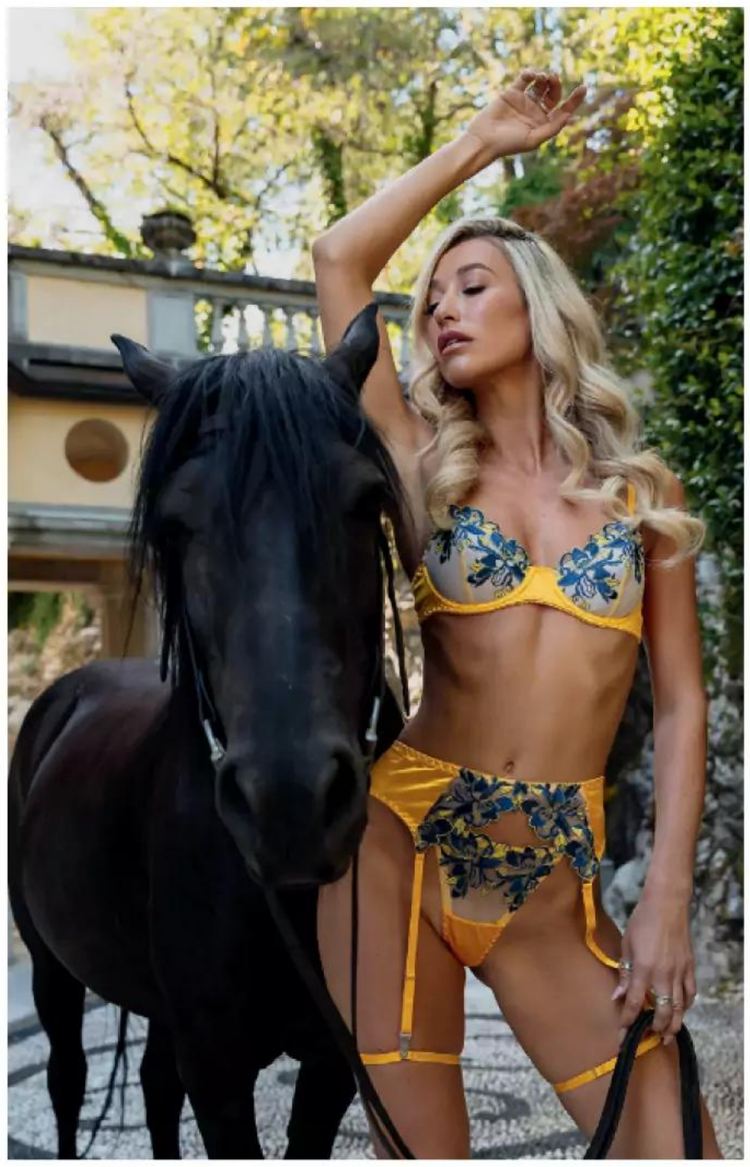
Be We is a Portuguese concept store on a mission to make luxury more sustainable and ethical. Their curated collections include fashion, home and lifestyle pieces that combine timeless design with a commitment to impact and positive change. Explore their vision for a better world at **beweconcept.com** IG: **@bewe.concept**

RUA & RUA



Jenny Ruadze, a self-taught fashion virtuoso hailing from Tbilisi, kindled her passion for style at age 12. Unveiling her inaugural collection at 18 marked the inception of her artistic journey, as she created RUA & RUA in Munich. Celebrated for haute couture, each creation is an exquisite symphony of handcrafted opulence. Rua & Rua is the epitome of artistry intertwined with elegance. Visit **ruaandrua.com** IG: **@ruarua_official**

LILIOSA LINGERIE



Get ready to bloom with Liliosa Lingerie's summer collection! Each set is as unique as you are, just like different petals on a flower. From sizes A to G and starting at £25, their affordable luxury celebrates every woman's shape. Join the fun and catch them live every day on TikTok for an exclusive shopping spree. Visit **liliosalingerie.com** IG: **@liliosalingerie**

SORORITY



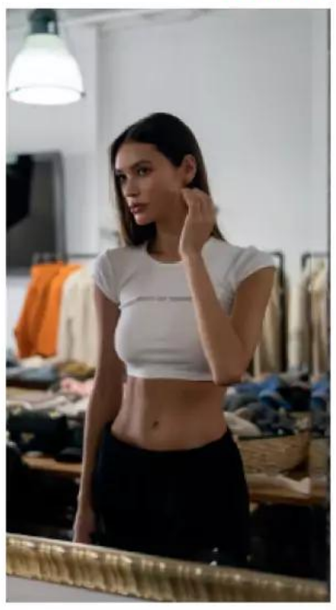
Introducing SORORITY APPAREL. The brand that meticulously creates superior cotton garments, crafted exclusively from natural fibres which are adaptable for all ages, body types, and tastes. Designed in rural Queensland, Australia they are dedicated to crafting garments that are meant to be cherished for years to come. Their designs are enduring classics, featuring liberty fabrics guaranteeing timeless style. Visit **sororityclothing.com.au** IG: **@sorority_the_label**

BELLARIA



Bellaria aims to empower women with affordable and vibrant activewear and swimwear. Born from founder Maria's desire for creative escape, the brand's pieces are versatile, effortless and stylish. Bellaria, meaning 'Beautiful Ria', harks to the founder's name and embodies her vision. Visit **bellaria.co** IG: **@bellaria.online**

WAYS OF TRAVEL



Introducing Ways Of Travel by Sangsoury Philavarn. Timeless luxury meets streetwear, ethically crafted in the US. Inspired by urban vibes hip-hop, and nature, their stylish pieces are made for those not afraid to redefine norms. Join the movement, embrace the edgy elegance of the Ways of Travel® lifestyle. Model: Anna Kryuchkova. Photography: Sangsoury Philavarn. Visit **ways-of-travel.com** IG: **@waysoftravelofficial**

LION + WILD SWIMWEAR



LION + WILD Swimwear defies norms and awakens your unpredictable, wild side. Originality is the most important factor for designer Heather Hilliard, when creating these unique pieces. Visit **lionandwild.com** IG: **@lionandwild**

TELA MERCANTILE



TELA MERCANTILE is a one-size-fits-all kaftan line that brings leisure and luxury together and is meant to make everyone feel beautiful! They celebrate the rich diversity of global cultures through crafted pieces that spotlight unique textiles from around the world. Visit **telaluxurymercantile.com** IG: **@telamercantile**

TWIZZELL



Twizzell is a luxury lifestyle brand sourcing unique and colourful clothing and homewares from around the world. Their latest collection of reversible block-printed gilets are a great addition to any wardrobe. Visit **twizzell.co.uk** IG: **@twizzellengland**

AMIAT



AMIAT (All Moods In All Textiles) is a luxury fashion house that exudes creativity. Their artistic designers create original and exclusive textile patterns in accessories, apparel, footwear and home decor. The iconic AMIAT logo stands for strength and balance. Visit **amiatluxury.com** IG: **@amiatluxury**

CHIFFIQUE



Chiffique is a luxury fashion brand founded by entrepreneur Aimee Lettich-Pearson. Their stunning silk ready-to-wear collections are inspired by Aimee's travels and her love of mountain landscapes. Each piece is meticulously handcrafted in their Florida atelier, ensuring high quality and uniqueness. The brand is committed to sustainable production practices, embracing slow-fashion processes and offering collections in limited quantities. Visit **chiffique.com** IG: **@chiffique**

PARTY PANTS



Party Pants - trousers with all the trimmings. Each pair boasts an artisan, handmade trim of pom-poms, tassels, or frills, injecting a playfulness into your everyday wardrobe. They fit well and are versatile, timeless and balance comfort, quality and style. It's time to unleash your clothing creativity, starting with your bottoms.

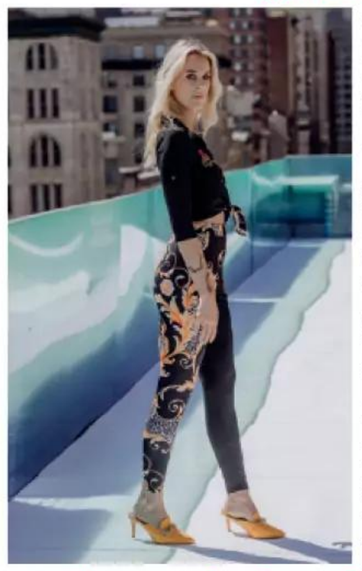
Visit **partypantsclothing.com** IG: **@partypantsclothing**

STAISE



Right now in London, Staise is the name on many girl's lips and the scrunchie in lots of girl's hair. Known for their trademark giant scrunchies and cosy linen pyjamas, Staise takes basic wardrobe staples and turns them into must-haves — because basics should never be boring. UK based, lovingly handmade. Visit **staise.co.uk** IG: **@scrunchbystaise**

QUITO CARIB



Quito Carib is a runway brand, founded by M.Ramirez DeHeywood. The brand elegantly fuses amazing Caribbean artistry with fine Italian handmade craftsmanship through the use of vibrant colours and fine fabrics; bringing his visions of luxury apparel and footwear to life. If you're interested in tasteful amazing show pieces, then look no further than House Of Quito Carib.

Visit **houseofquitocarib.com** IG: **@houseofquitocarib**

AARON ASUNSOLO



Aaron Asunsolo is an up and coming brand known for their diverse, fun and playful pieces. Their collections range from outerwear to swimwear, and each garment starts with a single patch that is then made into a beautiful one-of-a-kind piece. With every piece hand-stitched and crafted from scratch, Aaron Asunsolo celebrates the essence of creativity and uniqueness. Visit **aaronasunsolo.com** IG: **@aaronasunsolo**

#THEBOXMETHOD



#TheBoxMethod, initially crafted for its therapeutic essence, uses the room as a metaphorical box for self-expression. Each portrait art that is made, within a box, represents a memory of an accomplishment or a completion from anything we face in our day to day lives. Founder Elisha Cutter's art serves as a voice, integrating streetwear and artwear on the runway. Visit **theboxmethodofficial.com** or IG: **@theboxmethodofficial**

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Gorgeous Gems



1. GULFLILY is an emerging jewellery brand that creates delicate handcrafted pieces designed to be lived in and loved by anyone. Their collections are inspired by the Florida Gulf Coast, and made with semi-precious gemstones, pearls, gold, rose gold and silver. Visit **gulflily.com** IG: **@gulf_lily**

2. Adorn yourself with artisanal craftsmanship and timeless beauty with this dainty heart charm necklace from **CEDAR AND CYPRESS DESIGNS**. Gold plated and waterproof, this piece marries sophistication with practicality and can be layered or worn alone. Visit **cedarandcypressdesigns.com** IG: **@cedarandcypressdesigns**

3. CLTV is a new and contemporary jewellery brand born in London. Inspired by its origins, CLTV draws its creativity from the abundance of art, culture and fashion in this iconic city. The debut collection 'Pearly Things' reimagines classical pearls in a modern context. This stunning handmade Maxi Pearl bracelet showcases the collection's elegance and understated refinement - a true hallmark of timelessness. Visit **cltvlondon.com** IG: **@cltvlondon**

4. Char Sidney's brand, **THE WANDERING JEWEL**, defies societal norms with meticulously crafted jewellery for bold women. After failing to find large heart shaped earrings, Char decided to create her own, which she features here with these stunning 57mm Large Heart Shaped Earrings Dipped in Diamonds. A girl's new best friend. Visit **thewanderingjewel.com** IG: **@twjstore**

5. Discover the captivating Eagle Collection by **FULLORD**, inspired by the resolute gaze of a magnificent and cherished falcon. Adorn yourself with these unconventional jewels and experience the power and elegance of nature. Designed in Switzerland. Made in Italy. Visit **fullord.com** IG: **@fullordgeneva**

6. Crafted and curated amidst the vibrant energy of Los Angeles, **LUNA BLÜ JEWELRY** presents a blend of timeless elegance and enduring craftsmanship, all at an accessible price. Each item is unique, meticulously handmade or curated to reflect the rarity and enchanting allure of a blue moon - a reflection of the very spirit embodied by Luna Blü. Among their standout items is the Argento Cuff, an adjustable, gold-filled piece with a classic vintage look. Visit **lunablujewelry.com** IG: **@lunablujewelry**

7. DELIGHT ECLECTIC is a demi-fine jewellery company known for its unique gemstones and ultra-feminine designs. The brand enhances natural gemstones with 14k gold-filled metal to create jewellery that exudes simplicity and elegance. Delicate wire wrapping and a minimalist aesthetic imparts refined femininity - perfect for layering and everyday wear. Visit **delighteclectic.com** IG: **@delighteclectic**

8. BRIGANTINE JEWELRY pieces compare with the nuanced artefacts of an art museum - subtle, refined, and profoundly meaningful. With a commitment to craftsmanship and a passion for detail, designer Justina invites you to adorn yourself with pieces that embody the feminine spirit and the elegance of classical forms. Visit **brigantinejewelry.com** IG: **@brigantinejewelry**

9. CRUSH JEWEL create stunning adornments that are modern heirlooms. Pictured here are their Nouveau Earrings - inspired by the sensual art nouveau period, when nature was at the heart of design. Handmade with 925 sterling silver and a wax carving technique, these earrings harmoniously complete any outfit. Visit **crushjewel.com** IG: **@crush_jewel_bcn**

10. RUAH ZIRACHI is an independent jewellery label in Currumbin Valley, Australia. With each piece being handmade to order by founder Jarrod Madssen, every ring carries with it a high-quality artisan touch. Experience the beauty of craftsmanship, made just for you. Visit **ruahzirachi.com.au** IG: **@ruahzirachi**

11. ZOE HOOP introduces the small Fear Not Hoops. These are uniquely designed and feel luxurious to wear, with their weight and high-gloss finish. They are classic but have a unique twist with the diagonal line across the ring. The words 'I Am With You' are subtly engraved on the back of the earring. Designed to remind you not to be afraid because God is with you. Perfect for layering or stunning enough on their own. Designed in Sweden, ethically made in Thailand. Visit **zoehoopjewelry.com** IG: **@zoehoopjewelry**

12. CASTLEFIELD COLLECTION specialise in heirloom-quality rings for the modern bride. Using ethical gemstones such as lab diamonds and moissanite, Castlefield create beautiful and durable contemporary jewellery. For expert ring advice, visit **castlefieldcollection.com** IG: **@castlefieldcollection**

13. Introducing **NADINE SUZANNE JEWELLERY**. These stacking rings are from the Shoreline collection. They were created to represent the shorelines of North Queensland. The textured gold represents the sand, while the high polish silver represents the water flowing onto the shore at the beach. Metal 9kt yellow gold and sterling silver. Visit **nadinesuzannejewellery.com** IG: **@nadinesuzannejewellery**

14. Discover hand-crafted elegance from North Carolina jewellery designer, **CHANGED IMPRESSIONS JEWELRY**. The brand is known for creating pieces that reflect the beauty of life's everyday moments. Their timeless collections feature 14k gold, gold-filled and silver pieces, offering something for everyone. Visit **changedimpressions.com** IG: **@changedimpressions**

15. The brand **MAËLA** represents vibrant, colourful, and imaginative treasures meticulously crafted in Germany. Tailored for modern individualists with a penchant for quality and exquisite materials, this label produces one-of-a-kind contemporary jewellery meant to be worn with both pride and joy. Visit **maela.shop** IG: **@maela.jewellery**

16. Exquisite earrings by **THREE X SEVEN JEWELRY**, designed by Asuka Saito. Crafted with hand-selected Australian opal and Japanese Akoya pearls, these pieces merge traditional elegance with contemporary design. Ethically produced, they represent luxury and responsibility. Visit **threexseven.style** IG: **@threexseven.style**

17. Inspired by the beach and coastlines, **CCWW DESIGN** by Christina Puchi offer stunning pieces that display natural objects alongside gold and gemstones. Christina believes each piece is a work of art that becomes more beautiful over time, thanks to the feelings it evokes and the memories it holds. Her classic pieces adorn and transport. Available at Bergdorf Goodman and other retailers. Visit **ccwwdesigns.com** IG: **@ccwwdesign**

18. CIAFANELLI is a luxury jewellery brand whose collections exude a classic yet contemporary Italian elegance. Lead designer Luna Cotelli combines elements of modernity, nostalgia and mythology to create worldly and timeless designs. Dedicated to the universal experience of joy, the Ciafanelli collection shows the extraordinary power of jewellery pieces that uplift us. Visit **ciafanelli.it** IG: **@ciafanelli**

19. Designer **ILAH CIBIS** injects fun, humour, and whimsy into her fine jewellery pieces. Her vibrant collections include irreverent 'Saints' medals, art nouveau floral pieces and statement 'Words of Wisdom' stacking rings. Visit **ilahjewelry.com** IG: **@ilahjewelry**

20. KURBÃNI DURJINI is a renowned British jewellery company crafting exquisite engagement rings. Their designs blend traditional elegance with contemporary flair, captivating couples worldwide. With meticulous attention to detail and exceptional craftsmanship, each ring from Kurbãni Durjini radiates timeless beauty, symbolising everlasting love and commitment. Visit **durjini.com** IG: **@kurbanidurjini**

21. SHUFFLED VINTAGE is a Latina-owned small business dedicated to prioritising slow fashion and sustainability by creating 1:1 upcycled designs with repurposed and secondhand materials. In addition, they donate 10% of their profit to environmental justice organisations monthly. Visit **shuffledvintage.com** IG: **@shuffledvintage**

22. EYE OF THE CAT JEWELLERY specialise in antique and vintage jewellery, as well as the specially designed cat-inspired charm connectors pictured here. The connectors are available in 18ct gold and set with different gemstones - a stylish yet functional addition to your jewellery box. Visit **eyeofthecatjewellery.com** IG: **@eyeofthecatjewellery**

23. SAINT FIG is an NYC-based fine jewellery brand that creates handcrafted designs from ethically sourced stones and recycled fine metals. With each enigmatic and versatile piece, Saint Fig redefines luxury and personalised collections with an innovative, adaptable capsule jewellery system. Visit **saintfig.co** IG: **@saintfignyc**

24. THIRD TONE focuses on making simple yet stylish jewellery that never goes out of style. The Cherry Heart Necklace features a charming heart pendant adorned with sweet cherries. Perfect for adding a playful touch to your everyday look, especially for spring and summer. Visit **shopthirdtone.com** IG: **@shopthirdtone**

25. LOVE KO JEWELRY is an independent, artist owned small business that designs limited edition collections of hand painted jewellery. Each design is inspired by a love for art and colour, featuring whimsical pieces with timeless quality. Worldwide shipping available. Visit **lovekojewelry.com** IG: **@lovekojewelry**

26. CATE'S JEWELRY encourages everyone to 'discover the sparkle within'. Their stunning collections feature bold and vibrant statement pieces, and classic sparkling accessories for every day wear. The brand delivers on quality and fabulosity, without compromising affordability. Visit **catesjewelry.com** IG: **@cates_jewelry**

27. LUNAK JEWELRY is a Greek fine jewellery brand creating a heaven of elegance and evolution of art. Inspired by textures of the universe and Greek mythology, Catherine Voulgaridou makes every piece by hand at her atelier showcasing exceptional craftsmanship and attention to detail. With its exquisite earthy elegance, the hand-sculpted Selene ring exudes a quietly restrained luxury, accented with four brilliant cut diamonds, 0.80ct combined, set in 18k yellow gold. Visit **lunakjewelry.com** IG: **@lunak_jewelry**



Picture Perfect

1. CHANELLE WOOLDRIDGE is an Australian artist and graphic designer, whose work depicts iconic locations and is characterised by black and white linework with vibrant pops of colour. Her precise and intricate pieces evoke cherished memories, and attract worldwide commissions from diverse clientele. Visit **chanellewooldridgeart.com** IG: **@chanelle.wooldridge**

2. Capturing moments. Finding Dreamers. Illustration: Life as you perceive and interpret it. **MARTY JONES** has worked as a freelance illustrator for over 40 years, with clients across the world. He has two illustrations in the permanent collection of the Museum of Biblical Art in Dallas, Texas. His preferred media is digital painting. Visit **mjarts.com** IG: **@mjartscom**

3. TANYA PAVAN is an award-winning fibre and textile artist based in Montreal, Canada. Drawing inspiration from her childhood, Tanya uses wool and embroidery thread on canvas to create vibrant and playful hand-sewn pieces. Her work is best known for its abstract minimalism and bold use of colour. Visit **tanyapavan.com** IG: **@tanya.pavan**

4. JADE VAN DER MARK's art explores how fashion and luxury mirror the values of contemporary culture. Models, European runways, front row-ers and fashion show attendees are all subjects of her evocative large-scale paintings. Van Der Mark delivers on capturing the energy of the ever-shifting zeitgeist. Visit **jadevandermark.com** IG: **@jadevandermark**

5. PAUL BENAVIDEZ is an award-winning portraitist and multidisciplinary artist in California. His work is inspired by our connections and disconnect to each other, to animals, and to the earth. Shown is 'Life Portrait of a Stone Sculptor' [dry pastel over pen and ink, 17"x23"]. Visit **paulbenavidez.com** - inquiries: +1 202 740 7303 and **terry@1810alleygallery**

6. TANIA LACARIA is an Italian-Canadian artist in Hamilton, ON, Canada with a background in Fine Arts and Interior Design. Her work explores paradox through themes rooted in gender, class division, body politics and relationships. The She's A Sweet Peach collection [Infradian shown here] is prompting viewers to ask the question "how do we talk about women?". LaCaria's works are held in private collections around the world and available through select galleries. Visit **tanialacariastudio.com** IG: **@tanialacaria**

7. ANKE RIEMENSCHNEIDER is an emerging multidisciplinary German artist based in Basel, Switzerland. Her works are an expression of the deepest of human emotions. They are melodic, harmonious and dense with meaning. Pictured here is 'Parzival_'. Visit **art-riemenschneider.com** IG: **@anke.riemenschneider**

8. MILLY J has recently created "Hidden Fate", part of her new collection in progress. It aims to highlight how everything has a risk. Life's growing pains are worth the heartbreak or sacrifices we face, giving us the strength to fly. Visit **millyj.art** IG: **@millyj.art**



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The Lifestyle Edit







1. Elevate your wine snacking experience with Manchego **WINE CHIPS**. Expertly designed and crafted, these crisps are accompanied by wine pairing suggestions curated by their team of Master Sommeliers. The rich sheep's milk cheese with hints of wild strawberries, watermelon with citrus, and floral notes, pairs perfectly with rosé, bubbly, champagne, and nearly any white wine. Visit **winechips.com** IG: **@winechips**

2. Introducing **STUDIO ZARD**, where visionary craftsmanship meets conscious elegance. Founded by two young visionaries, Tio and Ivan, each design is meticulously crafted by their skilled hands. Inspired by their passion for sustainability, they utilise recycled gold and silver, alongside lab-grown diamonds and precious gems to create pieces that transcend trends and resonate with individuality. Visit **studiozard.eu** IG: **@studiozard.eu**

3. APERITIVO CLUB crafts spritz cocktails with real fruit, wild botanicals, and organic honey. These delicious drinks are powered by nature to bring you flavours of the Italian Riviera. Grab an Italian spritz by Aperitivo Club and live a balanced lifestyle. Visit **aperitivo.club** IG: **@aperitivo.club**







4. Renowned for her elegant and minimalist style, **MIJA MERA**, a Germany-based editorial and wedding photographer, crafts artistic imagery. Alongside her husband, they capture moments in photo and video that evoke a depth of emotion. Mija's approach fosters a safe and joyful environment, resulting in iconic, soul-stirring photographs. Visit **mijamera.com** IG: **@mija.mera**

5. Artist Shea, from **LEWA GLASS**, is dedicated to creating pieces that embody her rich cultural heritage. Her goal is to infuse her artwork with vibrant colours and vitality, adding a unique touch to the world of glass art. Visit **lewaglass.com.au** IG: **@lewaglass**



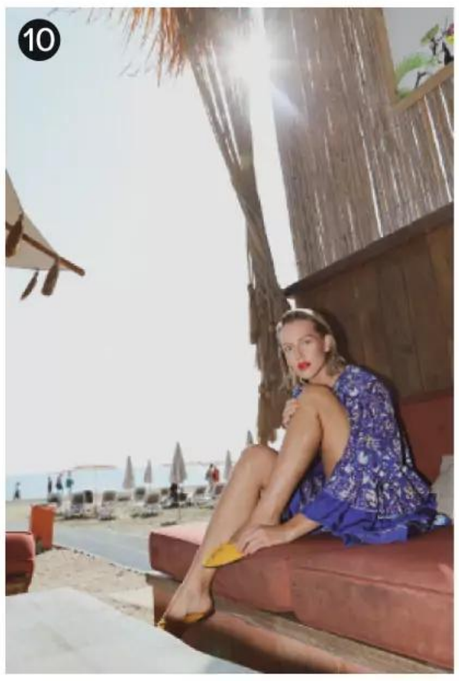




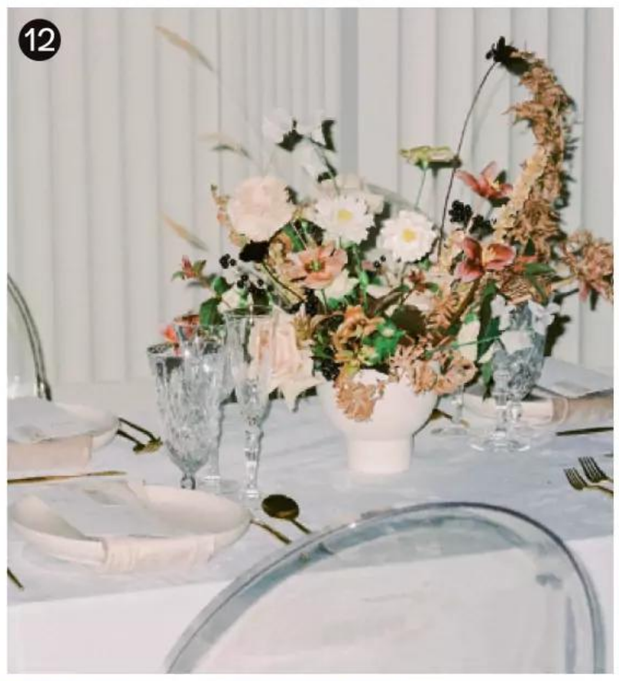
6. DEBORAH WOOLFORK JEWELRY DESIGN is a US-based jewellery maker, with decades of experience creating stunning, heirloom-standard pieces. Inspired by ancient materials and the power of human connection, their collections are expertly hand-crafted and designed to create legacy and stand the test of time. Visit **woolforkdesign.com** IG: **@deborahwoolforkjewelrydesign**

7. Abbey Todesco, owner of **HONEY & FERN PHOTOGRAPHY**, is an international wedding photographer based in Massachusetts. Her work captures couples in a documentary style, with an editorial and romantic flare created in the editing process. Abbey offers images shot both digitally and in 35mm film, each with uniquely beautiful effects. Visit **honeyandfernphotography.com** IG: **@hellohoneyandfern**

8. CACAO COLLECTIVE provides premium cacao blends that aim to target your energy and focus without the the need for highly caffeinated products. The brand blends tasty nutrition, science-backed ingredients and convenience, to make healthy choices an enjoyable experience. Visit **cacaocollective.com.au** IG: **@cacao_collective**





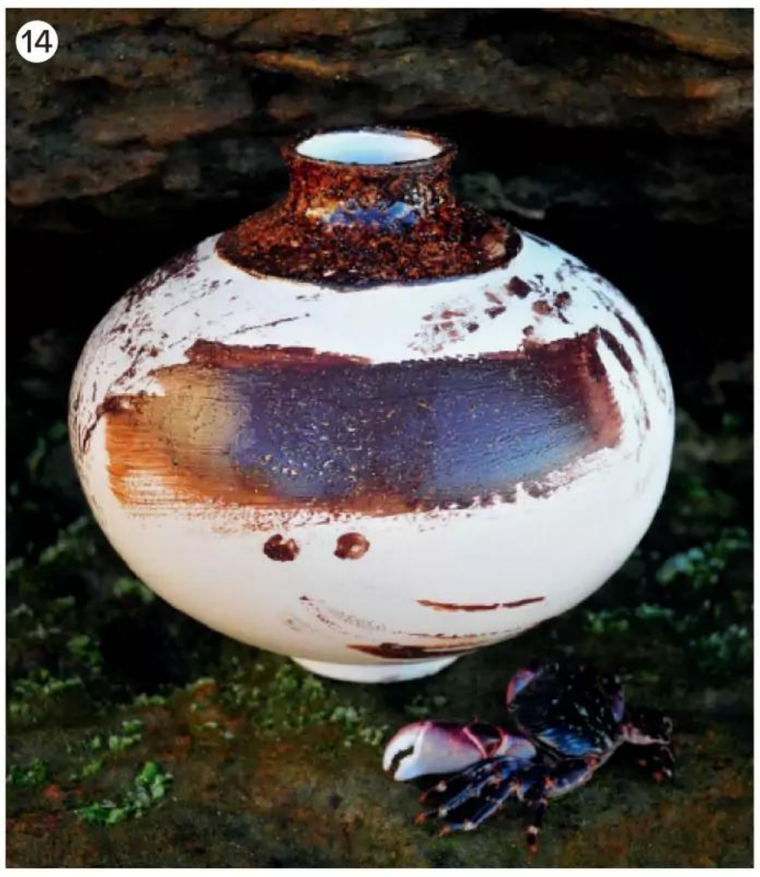


9. Australian-Based **THE POTATO BARKERY** is the home of bespoke, luxurious and whimsical treats for dogs. They nurture a creative approach to canine enrichment with handcrafted cookies by a Le Cordon Bleu alumnus, using the highest quality organic human-grade ingredients and superfood powders. Visit **thepotatobarkery.com.au** IG: **@thepotatobarkery**

10. The **MAHARASI** brand represents the heritage of Persian and Indus Valley cultures, honouring the skill and creativity of women weavers. Every design intricately weaves together tales of nature's splendor and harmony, mirroring the essence of femininity and the nurturing spirit of the natural world. Prioritising sustainability, they present exquisite pieces that exude enduring grace with a modern edge. Visit **maharasi.com** IG: **@maharasi_official**

11. ASPEN AVENUE is a photography studio run by husband and wife team Nicole and Michael. The duo are renowned for capturing weddings in a way that evokes elegance, artistry, charm and nostalgia. They are based in Chicago and work internationally. Visit **aspenavenue.com** IG: **@aspenavenuestudios**





12. NARELLE JANINE EVENTS stands as a distinguished luxury event planning and design firm. Fueled by a profound appreciation for human connection, a passion for travel, an eye for fashion, and a love for art. The team specialises in crafting meticulously curated weddings for discerning couples. With its headquarters situated in Toronto, Canada, Narelle Janine operates on a global scale, extending its exceptional services to clients worldwide. Visit **narellejanine.com** IG: **@narellejanine**

13. Founded during the pandemic, **ISEABABY** developed an innovative DIY at-home ultrasound device to enable parents to catch a peek of their baby at any time, in the comfort of their own home. iSeababy is designed to enhance the pregnancy experience - it does not replace regular medical check ups or professional medical advice. Visit **iseababy.com.au** IG: **@iseababy**

14. Ariana Kier of **OLLA CERAMICS** works with the elements that surround her- integrating soils, sediments and botanical elements in ways that challenge the art form and highlight the merging of science and experimentation within design. Pictured is a cyanotype impression of kelp done on porcelain with a local marine biologist, Oriana Poindexter. Visit **ollaceramics.com** IG: **@olla.ceramics**

15. INISH LIVING is an innovative, female-founded luxury wellness and lifestyle brand based in Ireland. Their distinct and well-crafted collections are designed to enhance movement, rest and play. Explore their full range online, including the best selling bio-based superior grip yoga mats and accessories. Visit **inishliving.com** IG: **@inishliving**

16. Alesia of **ALESIA FILMS** is a luxury destination wedding videographer whose work is both elegant and thoughtfully crafted. Each of her unique wedding films are produced in an emotion-driven, whimsical, and cinematic way. Both digital and 8mm formats are available. Visit **alesiafilms.com** IG: **@alesiafilms**

17. Based in the US, **ASTERIA PHOTOGRAPHY** create transcendent and timeless images that capture the true magic of love stories. With twelve years of experience, the team infuse images with romance and an editorial flair - creating captivating visuals that celebrate the beauty of human connection worldwide. Visit **asteriaphoto.com** IG: **@asteriaphoto**

18. VEILS & VIBES creates chic, contemporary nuptials, curated by emerging Australian stylist Lauren Mancini. Inspired by timeless heritage design delivered with a modern finesse, Perth based Veils & Vibes is available internationally for vibrant, hopeless romantics. Photographer: Kimmy Stevens. Visit **veilsandvibes.com.au** IG: **@veilsandvibes**

19. KINSHIP BY KRISTY is a Melbourne based wedding and editorial photographer, creating ethereal and romantic imagery in an editorial and documentary style. Kristy is drawn to quiet moments with heartfelt connections, unguarded beauty, motion and low light. She is inspired by her couples and tells each story honestly, artfully and stylishly. Visit **kinshipbykristy.com** IG: **@kinshipbykristy**

20. WHITELOFT CERAMICS is based in Canada. Amanda Payette is a self-taught potter creating hand thrown, functional pottery. The distinct neutral, hygge style is the inspiration of her simplistic aesthetic in her pieces. Visit **whiteloftceramics.com** IG: **@whiteloft.ceramics**

21. LINGO THE FLAMINGO is your baby's newest plant based teether and adventure friend. Flamingos represent elegance, strength, courage and determination, all qualities little ones need when tackling all of life's early developmental stages. Made of natural rubber and with no holes, Lingo is safe for water play as well as being eco-friendly and biodegradable. So now your little darling can chew on a teether that is safe for them, and for our beautiful planet. Visit **lingotheflamingo.com.au** IG: **@lingotheflamingo_**

22. Based in the Mediterranean, **ILIOS ART** is an artistic brand that creates ceramics, paintings, hand-painted totes, prints and more. Deeply inspired by the beauty of the Mediterranean, founder Nicole's collections are imbued with Greek-inspired imagery and the energy of island life. Visit **iliosart.com** IG: **@ilios.art**

23. FIERY JEWELRY is a 90s inspired jewellery brand. Their collections are curated in Los Angeles, and inspired by timeless pieces worn by the icons of fashion. Their minimalist designs make you feel sexy, polished and nostalgic. Available in a range of textures, shapes and colours. Visit **fieryjewelry.co** IG: **@fieryjewelry**

24. Introducing **THE BABY GIFTING COMPANY**, an exquisite and sustainable brand, where opulence meets eco-consciousness. Using premium cashmere and organic cotton, gifts are meticulously crafted to embody both luxury and sustainability. Launched by mother of three Shiba Babamiri, each piece is thoughtfully designed to be a cherished keepsake. Visit **babygifting.com** IG: **@thebabygiftingcompany**

25. Belinda Mitchell-Reilly created **BMR ACTIVE** for women worldwide, offering accessible solutions for mental and physical fitness. Their activewear is economic, practical, comfortable, stylish and suitable for all fitness genres, and is tested by Belinda in the yoga studio and gym. The size ranges from XXS to XXL – inner balance is not defined by size at BMR Active. Visit **bmractive.com** IG: **@bmr_active**

26. Sarah and Tom Bowness of **BOWNESS FILM** are a husband and wife photography team whose editorial, romantic and documentary style will undoubtedly provide you with timeless footage to treasure forever. Visit **bownessfilm.co.uk** IG: **@bownessfilm**

27. BRITTANY BOOTE is a globally acclaimed photographer whose portfolio includes weddings, portraiture, and editorial. She is renowned for her sophisticated and refined style, and ability to infuse shots with glamour and emotion. Brittany has a distinct perspective, and a gift of capturing profound moments with authenticity and radiance. Visit **brittanyboote.com** IG: **@brittanyboote**

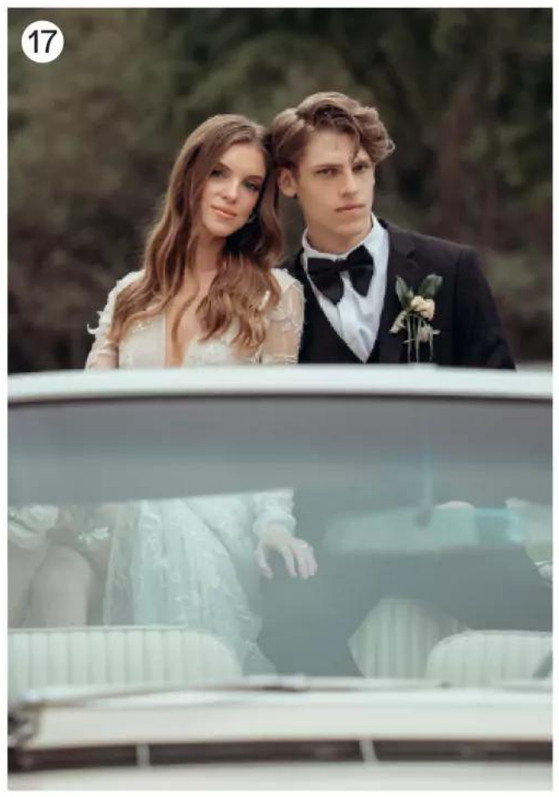
28. Kim Zebron of **COUNT IN THREES PHOTO** is an established wedding photographer whose documentary-style images are bold, raw and detailed. Kim believes that her role is not only to create exquisite imagery, but also to help couples relax, soak in their celebrations and see themselves in a new light. Available for weddings worldwide. Visit **countinthreesphoto.com** IG: **@countinthreesphoto**

29. KATE METTEN is an award winning ceramic designer and painter based in Vancouver, Canada. Influenced by Modernist philosophies, Metten's work comes to life through intuitive construction and response to local materials. Visit **katemetten.com** IG: **@kate_metten**

30. MOS X DAILY is one of the world's first highly concentrated sea moss sachets, harvested in one of the most biodiverse reefs in the world. Mos x Daily's mission is to ensure the world is consuming the highest quality sea moss whilst also harvesting directly from their own locations, all while supporting local communities. Sea moss is an incredible superfood with 95+ vitamins and minerals. Visit **mosxdaily.com** IG: **@mosxdaily**

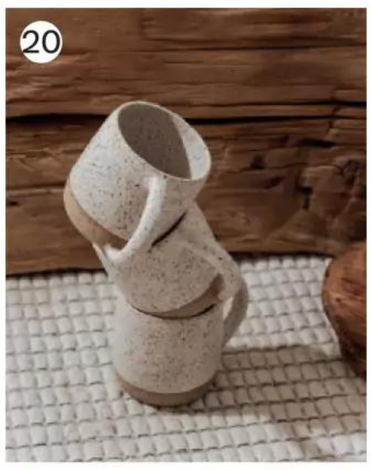
































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Get The Glow









1. BACKTURE ORGANICS is a new organic skincare brand for the adventurous man. The brand is known for their fresh, woody aromas and clean-beauty formulas. Trial their products by buying their Discovery Kit, and then receive the price of the kit off your next purchase. Visit **backtureorganics.com** IG: **@backtureorganics**

2. Indulge your regime in the oceans of New Zealand with **THIRTIEVES SKINCARE**'s Sienna Bioactive Hydrating Serum, formulated with botanicals from native red seaweed and mamaku [black fern]. Thirtieves Skincare pioneer with their minimalist and intentional Capsule Skincare collection. Visit **thirtieves.com** IG: **@thirtieves_skincare**







3. A.SKIN's skincare technology integrates Red Light Therapy, Micro-current modalities, Therapeutic Warmth, and Facial Massage. Cognisant of technology's pervasive impact on daily life, the brand wanted to introduce an innovative product designed to help target the look of fine lines, wrinkles, blemishes, and spots. Visit **a-skn.com** or email **hello@a-skn.com**

4. ELLATU is a luxury beauty brand born from the creative minds of mother-daughter duo Vanesa and Nicole Levine. Their passion for innovative haircare solutions led to the creation of their technologically advanced products. Discover the magic of Ellatu, where science meets indulgence. Visit **ellatu.com** IG: **@ellatu_beauty**



5. BIOKIDÉ is a sustainable luxury cosmetics brand providing a skincare range made through a magical and therapeutic ingredient: the baobab oil. Their cosmetics combine naturally extracted products with centuries-old African tradition and French Bioscience manufacturing know-how to offer clean cosmetics products. Visit **biokide.fr** and **@biokide** on IG.



6. Experience the visible benefits of **AALGO**, a skincare brand specialising in organic seaweed products. Their stunning holistic skincare range is packed with bioactive ingredients. Their products help skin appear radiant and feel smooth and nourished with moisture. Feel empowered to celebrate the skin you are in, by harnessing the power of nature. Visit **aalgo.com** IG: **@aalgo_skincare**





7. Introducing the PhytoLipid Refining Body Oil from **ARÊMÊS FERMENTIS**. This product is formulated with nutrient-rich bioactive ingredients like cranberry, pomegranate, rosehip, and fermented prickly pear. The oil aims to leave skin appearing brighter and feeling soft and tightened. Visit **aremesfermentis.com** IG: **@aremesfermentis**

8. HARUHARU WONDER is a Korean skincare brand that is vegan, sustainable and woman-owned. Their product ranges offer affordable and conscious beauty solutions that aim to be empowering. Featured here is their new Black Bamboo Daily Soothing Sun Shield, a handy portable sunscreen in a stick. It's easy to re-apply anytime, even over make-up, and has a high UV protection and non-greasy finish. Visit **haruharu.com** IG: **@haruharuwonder_official**

9. Introducing **BEYOUTIFUL**'s signature Anti-Accelerated Ageing Oil Serum. This lightweight serum aims to help skin feel soft and smooth. It contains fatty acids and vitamins and is multipurpose for both skin and hair. Vegan and cruelty-free. Visit **beyoutifulskinandhair.com** IG: **@beyoutifulskinandhair**

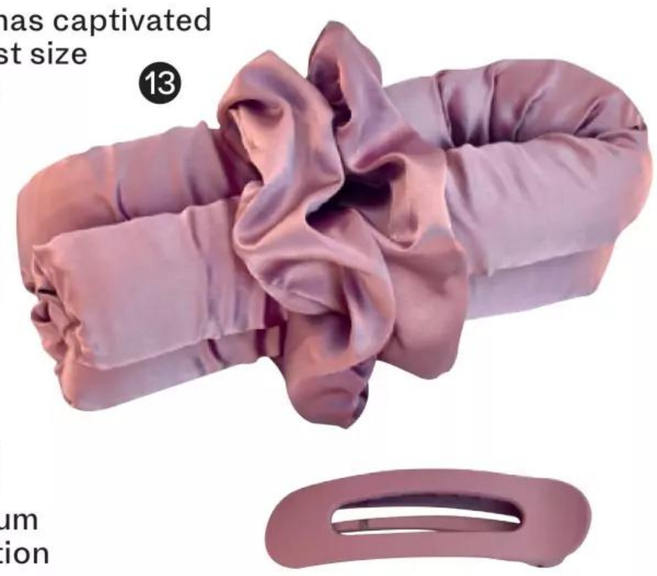
10. FOREST RIOT is an organic beauty brand based in Scandinavia. Their expert team use ethically-sourced ingredients to create premium-quality cosmetics enhanced with Forest Soil Extract. Their products are vegan, dermatologically tested, organic-certified and scientifically proven. Forest Riot's stunning range of cosmetics aims to respect and protect the planet whilst offering your skin the richest rewards that nature has to offer. Featured here is their signature Face & Body Oil. Visit **forest-riot.com** IG: **@forest.riot**



11. GREVINNANS RUM is an award-winning beauty brand whose beautiful skincare range is designed and handmade in Sweden. All of their products contain generous amounts of natural ingredients, including extracts, clays, and essential oils. Their Firming Body Oil is suitable for all skin types, and aims to leave the skin appearing smooth. Visit **grevinnansrum.se** IG: **@grevinnansrum**

12. Luxurious and long lasting. **TULITA** is setting the new benchmark in 100% natural fragrance. Made from ingredients sourced entirely from nature, and in a bottle that is more like a work of art, with a hand carved crystal. Delve deeper into the world of Tulita and visit **tulita.co** IG: **@tulita.co**

13. The **ETERNAL MUSE** Jumbo size heatless curler has captivated the attention of social media users. Boasting the largest size in its class, this heatless curler is also renowned for its remarkable softness, providing utmost comfort while offering effortless curls. Discover them at **eternalmuse.com** and **@eternalmusehair** on IG.



14. FLOWUS is an emerging Danish beauty brand that creates plant-based skincare, made in Denmark using key natural ingredients. Featured here is their bestselling Sensitive Skin Repair Cream. This product is suitable for very dry skin, and is easy to spread and does not feel greasy. Visit **flowus.dk** IG: **@flowus_dk**



15. Unlock the benefits of saffron with the Brightening Saffron Elixir Serum from **DEWDROP SKINCARE™**, a must-have in the world of Ayurveda! This precious serum aims to leave skin visibly glowing and it has a combination of nutrient rich superfoods. Join the Ayurvedic skincare revolution today! Visit **dewdropskincare.co.za** IG: **@dewdrop_skincare**



16. Introducing **REINVENTED PARFUMS**. This perfume Sacred Bond encompasses fruity accords of raspberry and citrus notes of bergamot, which unfold in a white heart of jasmine, gardenia and rose. Warmth explodes amidst the floral accords in deep connection with sandalwood and benzoin, enveloped by delicious caramel, vanilla and saffron. An intense and magnetic harmony. Visit **reinventedparfums.com** IG: **@reinventedparfums**



17. MAMABARE introduces their MamaBalm - an award-winning beauty balm, with multiple uses for the face, hands, feet, body, lips and hair. It is designed to nourish the skin with moisture. Its ingredients include sea buckthorn and aloe vera and it can also be paired with MamaBare's Exfoliating Blend to create a face mask. Visit **mamabare.co.uk** IG: **@mamabare_natural_skincare**



18. OLJA's Renewing Petals is a gentle manual exfoliant that is designed to double as a rich mask that nourishes your skin with moisture. It includes a blend of flowers and leaves. It helps to gently remove surface skin, leaving your skin feeling hydrated with a radiant-looking glow. Visit **oljalife.com** IG: **@oljalife**



19. ALEXANDRA ORGANIC specialises in skin and haircare products formulated with natural ingredients. Pictured here is the brand's hero hair formula, imbued with a stunning fragrance that aims to linger for up to 24 hours. Scented with notes of specific fruits, herbs, flora and cedarwood, this delicate spritz delivers femininity and grace. Visit **alexandraorganic.al** IG: **@alexandra_organic**



20. WILDCAT LASHES introduce their Reusable Pre Glued Press On Lash Extensions for home application, lasting up to 7 days and at only a fraction of the price of salon lashes. The lashes use the unique 'LP03 Pop on + Go' style by Wildcat Lashes. With a quick application and no messy glue, they are perfect for a busy schedule! Find the Lash Poppers at-home extension styles and more at **wildcatlashes.co.uk** IG: **@wildcatlashes**





21. Introducing Santal Oud by **THOMSON CARTER**, a luxurious unisex fragrance blending the richness of saffron, santal, and oud. Crafted by a British luxury brand committed to cruelty-free and vegan-friendly formulations. Experience sophistication with every spritz. Visit **thomsoncarter.com** IG: **@thomsoncarter_**



22. MAISON ZAGARA introduces their Jade Facial Elixir. It is formulated for very dry, dull or mature skin. It contains marula, avocado, apricot, almond and blackcurrant oils, as well as vitamins, essential fatty acids and micro nutrients. The elixir aims to nourish the skin with moisture. Visit **maisonzagara.com** IG: **@maisonzagara**



23. Discover the magic of **DUCHESS PRESTIGE** candles, crafted in Glastonbury, UK. Infused with Chalice Well's red spring water and a divine apricot scent, these candles aim to fill your heart with love and guide you to a harmonious future. Visit **duchessprestige.co.uk** IG: **@duchess_prestige**

24. D.LICIOUS is a French natural skincare brand, popular with beauty enthusiasts internationally - from Paris to New York. Their products are a feast for the senses, and are a favourite among some celebrity make-up artists and aestheticians. Featured here is the bestseller La Crème Orange® - a cream for all skin types that aims to create the appearance of radiance. Visit **dlicious.fr** IG: **@d.licious_cosmetic**



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Proust Questionnaire

JEAN SMART

The Emmy winner and star of Hacks *on witchy bloodlines, Jane Goodall, and the importance of good lighting*



Who are your heroes in real life? First responders. One of my younger brothers and his girlfriend are both retired firefighters. I hear their stories, and it's really humbling and moving. **What do you consider the most overrated virtue?** Chastity. Ha ha ha!

Which historical figure do you most identify with? My eight times maternal great-grandmother. She was arrested in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 and charged with witchcraft but missed being hanged by one day because she "confessed." Her name is Dorcas Hoar (an unfortunate name!). She was very brave. You can look her up on Wikipedia. **What is your most marked characteristic?** People tell me it's my laugh. I love to laugh. **What is your idea of perfect happiness?** My kids are in the house. I've been gardening in my vegetable garden. I have absolutely zero obligations or calls to return. Now I'm fixing dinner with music playing and having a glass of wine. **What is your current state of mind?** Chaotic. **What is your most treasured possession?** Other than my children, my new house. **What is your greatest fear?** Losing a loved one. **Which living person do you most admire?** Jane Goodall. I got the chance to meet her a few years ago, and it was the thrill of a lifetime. When I was little, I wanted to be her. I thought she had the coolest life in the world. **What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?** When I'm feeling lazy and I sleep in too much. **What is the trait you most deplore in others?** Cruelty, and also general rudeness and unkindness. I've always told my children: Don't ever find entertainment in someone else's discomfort. **What is your greatest extravagance?** Perfume and going out to dinner. **What is your favorite journey?** The British Isles. My dad was first-generation Scottish. I've been to Scotland a couple of times and met some relatives. I also love Ireland and Wales. They are just so beautiful, and the people are so friendly.

What do you dislike most about your appearance? I wish I had a really fabulous head of long hair. **Which living person do you most despise?** Well, *despise* is a very harsh word, but the closest to that would be Donald Trump. He's done so much harm to our country, and much of it is irreparable, I fear. **When and where were you happiest?** My wedding day, and when my children were first placed in my arms. **Which talent would you most like to have?** Being an incredible dancer. I wish I'd pursued singing and dancing more. Especially dancing. It might be a little late now.... **What do you most value in your friends?** Kindness and laughter. If someone makes me laugh, I'm halfway in love. **Who are your favorite writers?** A few are John Irving, David Sedaris, David McCullough, and Amy Tan. **How would you like to die?** In a really comfy bed. Very, very old, but still very much aware, with my loved ones near me...and good lighting. **What is your motto?** Find humor in everything. ■

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